FROM NOWHERE TO NOWHERE:

J. M. COETZEE INTERPRETS THE ROLE OF THE AUTHOR

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SUMMARY

J.M. Coetzee's four most recent books, *Youth* (2002), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), appear to present a shift in tactics within his oeuvre. As part of a long trajectory of related concerns that reach back to Coetzee's earliest writings, this quartet of books invites us to consider anew facets of authorship, through the emergence of different textual and rhetorical strategies. These works contain some of Coetzee's most personal reflections upon the possibilities and the hesitations of writing but they also subvert these "realities" by using such strategies as mock-autobiography and alternative narrative or authorial personae. This thesis explores these issues through five major and inter-related ideas. These are writing truthfully; the interpretive-performative aspect of authorship; writing as ethical action; writing as the denial of power; and writing as public intellectualism. Despite his equivocal findings on almost every aspect of writing, we can conclude that Coetzee's interpretation of the author gives the voice of the writer its due as a seeker of truths albeit with moments of blindness. Further, Coetzee's protagonists are arguably versions of himself, born out of his own "flesh and blood experiences." These findings have broader implications for the placement of the writer within literary critical theory, in particular the apparent need to always avoid conflating protagonist with the author, and the implied impossibility of recovering authorial intention. Coetzee's interpretation of the role of the author should at the very least constitute a refreshing of the current critical thinking on the subject.

INTRODUCTION

The architecture of J.M. Coetzee's oeuvre was perhaps long ago designed with his own socio-political and cultural-historical constraints in mind, and therefore the particular directions it has taken (the structural innovations, the themes and the oblique treatment of those themes) have largely stemmed from his deep discomfort at being a white South African in South Africa. The South African academic David Attwell, well regarded for his critical insights into Coetzee's writing, and known to have a close personal friendship with him, notes in a conference paper entitled "Coetzee's Estrangement", that Coetzee's memoir *Youth* suggests "[he] was on the path of emigration soon after the Sharpeville massacre and its consequences. By the late 1960s (a period not covered by the memoir) he would have succeeded, had it not been for the legal constraint of being unable to achieve permanent residence in the United States." (3) In the same paper Atwell also notes that:

> [n]early all of Coetzee's fiction deals in one way or another with subjects who reluctantly find themselves forced to engage with a particular historical situation, and there should be no mystery about where this emphasis comes from: it comes from Coetzee's own sense of having South Africanness in various forms (as a legal structure of citizenship, an historical identity, as well as the cultural edifice of being a South African writer) forced upon him. A consistent premise of Coetzee's writing is that one does not choose one's history; it chooses you. (2)

In his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech in 1987, Coetzee lamented:

> How we [that is Coetzee and his fellow South African novelists] long to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence, and take up

> residence in a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation . . . . (99)

Alongside South Africa's crushing realities of suffering and injustice, its vast system of literary censorship also led to a longing for the free flight of the imagination, and for an escape from the relentless circumscription of what "one should write about." In his book *The Literature Police* that examines recently opened archives of the apartheid censorship bureaucracy in South Africa, Peter D. McDonald, in a comment posted to the Oxford University Press USA Blog, discovers that:

> [A] vast number [of the reports] were actually written by literary academics, writers and esteemed university professors. That was surprising enough. Digging a little deeper into the archives, and the history of the system, I discovered that a particularly influential group of these seemingly miscast figures actually saw themselves as guardians of the literary, and, more bizarrely, as defenders of a particular idea of the 'Republic of Letters'. What on earth were they doing there? And what sense was I to make of the fact that, as the archives revealed, repression and the arts were so deeply entangled in apartheid South Africa?

McDonald's research also looks at how censorship affected Coetzee's writing. On the book's Web site, www.theliteraturepolice.com, Coetzee is quoted as calling the book "indispensable reading if we wish to understand the forces forming and deforming literary production in South Africa during the apartheid years."

While state censorship directly affected the sorts of fictions that were deemed acceptable, one indirect consequence of the clampdown was the emergence of South African progressives who, in fighting against the apartheid state, attempted to force writers to write in service of that struggle, in a style that valorised realistic representations in fiction. From early on Coetzee explicitly set himself apart from that

brand of South Africa's cultural politics. His combative polemic in the 1987 speech "The Novel Today" rejected the call for artists to be populist, and called history a kind of discourse that was potentially a rival to the novel's mode of understanding the world. To Coetzee, "history is not reality" but "a kind of discourse", "a novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse." (4) He goes on to say that:

> In our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that a history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other . . . . (4)

This stance, which Attwell described as probably unnecessarily polemical, to the extent that it drew attention away from Coetzee's undeniable engagement with South African realities, brought charges of political and ethical evasion from those who felt the injustices of that particular context had to be addressed directly. In a journal article entitled "The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee", Attwell does concede that in the earliest instances of Coetzee's critical responses to the literary-intellectual environment in South Africa, his political interest in a work of fiction comes after his interests in the formal and then epistemological dimensions of that work (582).

And so, whereas his writing could always be said to have been born out of the outrage of colonization, apartheid, and its aftermath, and even to trace the fictional possibilities of freedom and escape, Coetzee always balanced these issues in favour of an approach of textual experimentation influenced by Western models of literary discourse, and the related, fiercely-held belief of the contestable nature of consensual versions of history. These responses seem also typical of Coetzee's desire to chart *new* territory in novel writing in a way that would be judged (by

Western literary standards) as *major*. His earlier works – most definitely *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Foe*, and arguably *Dusklands* (particularly its second half), Waiting *for the Barbarians* and *In the Heart of the Country* – set down mainly through a self-conscious style (something many critics have called an allegorization of theme), the sheer difficulties of acting (including the act of writing) within a master narrative not of one's making. Struggling under the strain of creating in a space that was suffocatingly unfree, Coetzee's writing in these books makes subversive attempts at escaping the long arm of the system that both spawns and constrains it. David Attwell notes that postmodern techniques are used as a "gesture of fictive displacement" or "an act of imaginative relocation" and each of Coetzee's earlier novels worked "to keep [South Africa] at arm's length" ("Coetzee's Estrangement", 3). These techniques also – predictably – erased any possibility of reading a unified meaning from the author or indeed even of seeing the author as a personality or a source of true information regarding his works. The disappearing author was in a sense a mere by-product of Coetzee's chosen means of expression, but its smoke and mirrors effects also dovetail with a deep scepticism over the available means of navigating his historical circumstances.

We are now seeing what might be termed a re-positioning on the question of the author, perhaps partly because Coetzee has left behind the enormous pressures of life in South Africa with his migration to Australia. As we enter the new millennium, *Elizabeth Costello* (1999), *Youth* (2002), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) – one called a fictionalised memoir, two others fictional works that share their central character (a writer of fiction whom Coetzee has used as his alter-ego in real life), and the final an experimental narrative (with another writer protagonist who

resembles Coetzee in many details of his characterization) - contain some of his most directly personal reflections upon the act of writing. The author's place and his function within the novel, and the meaningfulness or substantiveness of the writer's profession, preoccupy these works. In an email to me on May 2007, David Attwell acknowledges this development and makes sense of it in the following way:

> The detachment from the immediate pressures of [South Africa] - and the loss of that intimacy with the beast that fuelled much of his earlier writing – has meant that he is tending to mine his own positionality more obviously, bringing it to the centre, rather than have it implicit, as it were. There is here, therefore, a return of the author, for personal and historical reasons….

To be sure it is a theme that is still subjected to the subversions and humbling destabilizations that postmodernist writers insist upon – and one part of Coetzee's meditation does take the form of a playful conversation with the postmoderns. What is more they ponder the fate and salvation of the author who chooses to sidestep his human duties, and question the quality of art by such an artist. These issues are given a sense of urgency, as the questioners in these books approach old age and "last things". Elizabeth Costello, Paul Rayment and J.C. each experience the decay of their bodies and the onset of illness, and Coetzee was sixty when he wrote *Youth*.

And so, it is not a stretch to term these books "late", in the sense used by Edward Said (via Theodor Adorno), who noted that near the end of their lives, great artists' "work and thought acquire a new idiom", something he called "a late style" (*On Late Style,* 6). A silvery chill undeniably blows through Coetzee's late works*)*, and a deliberate use of narrative artifice ((I refer here to *Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* which can all be described as episodic, non-linear, tangential) marks a fundamental break from recognizable story-telling. Adorno said,

"In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes" (*On Late Style*, 12), by which he meant these works contain against the grain qualities of eccentricity and intransigence. The dissonances in Coetzee's books, in so far as they are illumined by this kind of analysis, add an important layer of complexity to this new phase of his that re-calls attention to the author.

These concerted reflections surrounding the author also address (although Coetzee might not have intended so) what might be termed a current imbalance in the scholarship surrounding the complex processes of writing – as opposed to the processes of reading, which is where much literary theory and criticism have rested their emphases since Roland Barthes' famous axiom, that "[t]he birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 213), took hold in the 1980s. Barthes' version of the author – bourgeois, God-like, possessing "a" message – is one that must be killed off for the sake of opening texts up to their full multi-dimensionality. Writerly texts that enable a proliferation of meanings – a *production* of meanings - are to be valued over readerly texts that promise the uncovering of limited and complete messages that flow directly from the author's pen. In similar vein, Michel Foucault challenged, as John Caughie expresses it in his *Theories of Authorhsip,* "the concept of the author as the source and centre of the text" (1):

> We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses . . . would unfold in a pervasive anonymity. No longer the tiresome repetitions:
>
> 'Who is the real author?'. . .
>
> 'What has he revealed of his most profound self in language?' (Foucault, "What is an Author?", in *Theories of Authorship,* 290)

Later, the poststructural theorists and reader response critics partly reinforced this idea of authorial anonymity. Jacques Derrida focused his critical energies on the reader and the text albeit emphasizing the reader's responsibility to both text and author. "What the author wanted to say" receded in the face of the far more essential task of uncovering the text's "proper limits". Along the same continuum, Stanley Fish placed emphasis on "genuine reading" as opposed to the "minimal consensus" that must first be established. To Fish, this meant acknowledging that understanding is shaped by "the same (culturally derived) interpretive principles" (*Is There a Text 337)* and therefore "[a] text cannot be overwhelmed by an irresponsible reader and one need not worry about protecting the purity of a text from a reader's idiosyncracies. (*Is There a Text, 336)*

So where has Coetzee situated himself in relation to current trends in literary theory and criticism on the subject of authors? Each of his books has that unmistakable stamp of the postmodern which, as Linda Hutcheon's essay "Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern" suggests, involves "creating the distance necessary for reflective thought". For instance, he describes an autobiography of his youth (*Youth*) as a "fictional memoir", thus immediately questioning the distinction between fiction and history. The term also marks everything in that book as "crafted" (facts are selectively chosen and put together in a certain order) and therefore, to an extent, open to charges of if not outright lying, then possible duplicity. In *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee calls repeated attention to the artifice of "the natural"/realism, and in all those books, he points as well to what Hutcheon describes as the "different possible relations (of complicity and conflict) between high and popular forms of culture" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 28).

And yet Coetzee's concerns – reflected in both his fiction and his essays and interviews – are those of a writer who is keenly aware that while postmodern strategies are of real use, they are unable to go help in ways that are fundamentally important to him. These include his embracing the idea of "the truth" and his rejection of the notion that all writing is in the end nothing more (or less) than play, wishing instead to elevate it to the position of guide or even dispassionate compass. For Coetzee,

> Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say. What it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place. . . . Truth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing. (*Doubling the Point* 18)

Given these differences, it is probably fair to say that Coetzee has on formal and epistemological grounds already absorbed the postmodern tenets and moved on. We have now the later phase of his writing that brings to the surface (and the centre) his own "positionality" that Attwell believes has always been there though not as clearly exposed. I believe we can begin to outline that position through the lens of Coetzee's meditation on the author, for while he consistently reviles any suggestion of imbuing the author with totalizing agency, Coetzee clearly wants to "say certain things" – to talk about common human needs, which include the writer's, to be socially responsible and progressive intellectual (or idealistic) beings. Whereas before he focused his energies on the formal and epistemological, he now turns to the personal, the political and the ethical, and uses the space allowed by postmodernist distancing techniques to consider anew, questions some might term old fashioned.

If one were to chart a very preliminary trajectory, not tied to the dates of publication but rather to the themes of the particular books, Coetzee's meditation on the writer begins in *Youth* with the fundamental question of writing out of a space of truth, goes through an important realisation in *Elizabeth Costello* and also *Slow Man* that there is a necessary but tenuous bond between writer and that which is written and a responsibility to the world outside the writer, and ends by asking in *Diary of a Bad Year*, what a writer can and *should* do in the circumstances he finds himself in. With all four books written post-apartheid, but within the ambit of a more militant America with (former) President George W. Bush at the helm and the corresponding global threat posed by Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, Coetzee increasingly identifies the confrontation of "global imperialism" as the correct task of the so-called intellectual today. Responding to André Du Toit who had critiqued South African intellectuals, calling them socially unaccountable and asking that they get rid of colonization and racialization within their institutions ("Critic and Citizen" 91), Coetzee says "it is clearly more urgent to recognise and confront the new global imperialism [of the United States]" ("Critic and Citizen: A Response" 111). In an e-mail message to me on May 29, 2007, the South African academic David Attwell put it more bluntly, saying that, "tendencies in the apartheid government now emerge as a severe but not idiosyncratic paradigm for much of what is happening in the world today. The problem - as it was in [South Africa] - is rather what does one do about it".

Through his recent fiction, Coetzee asks what difference the writer can make, in a way that makes increasingly explicit, the parallelism and even the points of intersection between his authorial and personal worlds. It is perhaps an approach he did not think possible pursuing before, given the overwhelming circumstances of

apartheid. The boundaries between fiction and non-fiction and between personal causes and fictional ones are becoming blurred as a result, and it is true to say that Coetzee's writings have increasingly become ruled by ideas and convictions rather than by plot, a point his very latest protagonist J.C. (an alter-ego who perhaps predicts Coetzee's own future) makes about aging novelists. In the four books that are the focus of this thesis, there are five major and inter-related ideas that I believe Coetzee explores about authorship. These are writing truthfully, the interpretive-performative aspect of authorship, writing (or rhetoric) as ethical action, writing as the denial of power, and writing as a special mode of thinking (or public intellectualism/idealism). Of exactly what nature this 'renewed' author is, is a question to be grappled with in the following chapters.

Making Connections

From nowhere to nowhere

One central idea that helped to contextualise this thesis and establish continuity with Coetzee's earlier writings is that of a journey that starts from or goes nowhere. The opening lines of *Elizabeth Costello* are:

> There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, *how to get us from where we are, which, is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank*. . . . People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on. [my emphasis] (1)

If there is a familiar echo in these lines, it is because the idea of journeying "from nowhere to nowhere" recurs in several of Coetzee's earlier works, including *In the*

Heart of the Country (1977),[1] *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980),[2] and *Age of Iron* (1990).[3] The movement from "nowhere to nowhere" has been interpreted as a political statement about the impossibility of making a difference in an environment of hyper-control. Rosemary Jolly chooses to explain this journey as:

> . . . the failure of the narrator's quest", [adding that] "Coetzee appears to suggest the limitations of' the practical benefit of fictions that deal with situations in which violence is endemic and torture common . . . The only thing that the novelist can do under such extreme circumstances, Coetzee suggests, is to point out the violence of the meaninglessness that such circumstances engender. (*Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing,* 133-134)

Jolly took her lead from Coetzee's perspective of his own marginality, contained in his 1987 Jerusalem Prize Acceptance speech, about how writers who work within constrained situations cannot expect to have any impact on their circumstances except vaguely in retrospect. While Jolly may be correct in her assessment of Coetzee's earlier fiction, it may not still hold for the four books looked at here. Instead, with his own altered circumstances, the journey from nowhere to nowhere might now be seen to embrace the paradoxical act of writing. Each authorial act is a

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[1] Early in the novel the unstable farmwoman Magda, caught in a fever of imaginings asks, "Have I, the true deepdown I beyond words, participated in these phenomena any more deeply than by simply being present at a moment in time, a point in space, at which a block of violence, followed by a block of scrubbing, for the sake of the servants, rattled past *on their way from nowhere to nowhere*?" [my emphasis] (*In the Heart of the Country* 17-18).

[2] In the last words of the novel, the Magistrate says "Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along *a road that may lead nowhere*" [my emphasis] (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 152).

[3] The phrase is expressed more obliquely here. Mrs Elizabeth Curren when she tries to be honest about her less than loving feelings towards a 15-year-old black boy describes her "error" to be "*like a fog, everywhere and nowhere.* I cannot touch it, trap it, put a name to it. Slowly, reluctantly, however, let me say the first word." [my emphasis] (136). Language, the point appears to be, is too imperfect a construction to properly reflect human thought and emotion; language too is "like a fog" – ubiquitous and yet precariously contingent.

consensual leap of faith, an acrobatic impossibility, although few may be aware of this dimension underneath the all-consuming strictures of existence. The paradox lies in the recognition that while the foundations of language are created of nothingness (in that they are random representations that lack single pure meaning), they still carry multiple freights (in relation to the self's sense of the world) that give writing real or absolute value. Those values translate into finding a space to act, including the possibility of individual escape, and of alternative existences. So whereas Coetzee's writing continues to be constrained by the "self-enclosed game" (*Doubling the Point* 393) that is language, now it makes the rules of the game ever more explicit, highlighting and subverting the rhetorical strategies surrounding realism, with a view to the possibility of escape – perhaps even to something better.

The middle voice

Related to Coetzee's positionality, which Brian Macaskill in his essay "Charting J.M. Coetzee's Middle Voice" says "might appropriately be placed somewhere in the middle of a topographical map" - "... we are on the road from no A to no B in the world, if such a fate is topologically possible ..."(66), there will be an effort to establish continuity with the earlier writing via his interest in the linguistic notion of the middle voice. In his earlier fiction, Coetzee's mode of coping with the stresses of his political context was to mine a certain neutral positionality and use a middle voice. In his "A Note on Writing" he says "The phantom presence of a *middle voice* (a voice still morphologically present in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit) can be felt in some senses of modern verbs if one is alert to the possibility of the threefold opposition active-middle-passive" (94). Macaskill argues that "Coetzee's act of

doing-writing" in the middle voice cogently represents a crucial – critical – response to the materialist historiography that still dominates the articulation of cultural politics in South Africa." (67) In Coetzee's later works, which are the focus of this thesis, some of the implications of using a middle voice – particularly where the fictional protagonists overlap Coetzee's own signifiers to a significant degree – have altered, and are explored in Chapter Five.

In saying that there are continuities and consistencies in general terms in Coetzee's oeuvre is to draw attention to the fact that as readers, we have an awareness that these books were written by a writer named Coetzee. We identify an authorial sub-code which produces an authorial inter-textuality; the texts do not inhabit a space of self-contained nothingness, and we as readers do not approach any of these texts "innocently". It is the recognition that there is a place for Coetzee-as-author, and our discernment of that entity's shape shifting form, that inform this thesis.

CHAPTER 1

THE MAKING OF THE AUTHOR

> All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography.
>
> (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point,* 391)

> This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction … - does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself?
>
> (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point,* 17)

> The only sure truth in autobiography is that one's self-interest will be located at one's blind spot.
>
> (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point,* 392)

I begin with *Youth* for three related reasons. Most obviously for the purpose of this thesis, is the direct infusion – *the return* -- of the author into the text that writing an autobiography entails. We are not hearing about Coetzee from a secondary source or inferring him from his fiction: this is Coetzee telling us about himself. Leaving aside the impossibility of recovering "a" self with total factual accuracy, the autobiography situates Coetzee in a moment of history, removes his pseudonymity, and gives us a vantage point from which to judge his authorial performances in the present and future. Second, because as an autobiography, *Youth* represents, in its very form and intent, a core idea of telling the truth. Truth telling for Coetzee

however, is never straightforward, and a key essay that helps elucidate some of the fundamental problems is his 1985 essay “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky”. In it, Coetzee talks of “the doubling back of thought that undermines the integrity of the will to confess.” (*Doubling the Point* 282) As we shall later see, the particular selection of facts that comprise *Youth* can be productively unpacked through the prism of the *Confessions* essay. And thirdly, because Coetzee’s decision to locate a point of origin within an particular phase in his own life (that is, his *youth*) is taken as an important if partial account of his intentions and methods in the fictional works which are explored in this thesis. In particular *Youth*’s autobiographical exploration of the problematic boundaries of truth-telling finds its fictional counterpart in *Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, each with protagonists who like Coetzee, appear to be value-committed beings.

In the history of the novel, the parallel to Coetzee’s story of his youth would most likely be “the novel of idealism and disappointment”. Flaubert’s *L’Education Sentimentale* (1869) is a fitting comparison for several obvious reasons – Coetzee too, writes the story of his youth in his (relative) old age, and it can be defined as a history of his feelings as a self-interested young man, in a novel whose tone is in turns pessimistic and ironic. The infusion of *self* is also an important point of confluence with Flaubert. Lest one is accused of conflating author and work, Coetzee uses his own reading of Flaubert to make an important distinction in *Youth* – a distinction that one feels is not incidental in any sense, but carefully calculated to trigger a parallel reading of Coetzee himself:

> He likes Flaubert. Emma Bovary in particular, . . . has him in her thrall. He would like to go to bed with Emma, hear the famous belt whistle like a snake as she undresses. . . .
>
> Of course Emma Bovary is a fictional creation, he will never run into her in the street. But Emma was not created out of nothing: she had her origin in the flesh and blood experiences of her author, experiences that were then subjected to the transfiguring fire of art. If Emma had an original, or several originals, then it follows that women like Emma and Emma's original should exist in the real world. And even if this is not so, even if no woman in the real world is quite like Emma, there must be many women in the real world so deeply affected by their reading of *Madame Bovary* that they fall under Emma's spell and are transformed into versions of her. They may not be the real Emma but in a sense they are her living embodiment. (25)

We begin our analysis then, with this overarching idea of a porous line separating the writer from his work, a deceptively simple idea, but one that has quite serious implications for the usual way we approach a book in (post)modern times. It is possible to say that in calling *Youth* a fictional memoir, Coetzee draws attention to the way authors themselves are partly works of creative fiction -- and yet by his close intertwining of fiction with the truth of real-life correspondence, he avoids a Kierkegaardian approach that posits the author as ever anonymous.

Youth (2002) is set mainly in London, England, in the early 1960s, where Coetzee worked as a computer programmer for IBM while also completing a Masters thesis on the English novelist Ford Madox Ford at the University of Cape Town (*in absentia*). Given its autobiographical nature and Coetzee's stated opinions about the difficulty, if not impossibility, of remembering without self-deception, we expect the book to be a postmodern tour de force of shifting truths. Instead we find a self-

reflexive meditation on truth telling, of whether it is possible to be completely un-self conscious in remembering the past, and if in the end it is the writing that leads the writer to the truth. The exercise of writing the truth, interrogating its sincerity, and finally concluding that absolute truths exist, though we can only stumble on them in moments of slippage, arguably form the basis of Coetzee's moral world. These discoveries enable us to enter the later works – *Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man and Diary of a Bad Year* – with some key pillars of support in place about Coetzee's conception of the author and the values and purpose of writing.

Coetzee's pointed attempts at pre-empting the blind spots of self-interest in *Youth* mainly involve looking back with a heavily critical eye. That "selective vision, even a degree of blindness…blindness to what may be obvious to any passing observer" (*Doubling the Point*, 391) that Coetzee worries so much about, is on the surface, successfully trumped by this approach to writing his past with as much harshness as possible. Indeed it is the young Coetzee who is shown to be "blind" and unqualified to write with any authority, leading us to question notions of the cult of personality. His grand desire to chart new territory in a way that will be judged "major" is expressed as merely imitative of the high modernist and elitist principles of Pound and Eliot, in a pointed parody of artistic originality. This partly translates into a wish to avoid "dismayingly modest little poems about everyday thoughts and experiences" (58) and to side with, to 'break into", "enlightened circles" of "creative spirits" (58). His coming upon *Watt* occurs fourteen pages before the end, its huge impact upon him only magnified by the one-page brevity of its description, and young Coetzee predictably then begins to side with the "classless", non-"stuffed shirt" (155) postmodernism of Samuel Beckett.

Between the lines of *Youth*'s unpromising beginnings emerges a picture of a young man possessed of a dogged will, and a lofty idea about himself. Young Coetzee is obviously intelligent enough to gain employment at IBM and eventually a position of no small responsibility at International Computers. He is also gifted enough to be offered a bursary to complete his Masters in literature, and even some flattering "academic chores" (135) by his thesis supervisor. The youthful Coetzee claims with supreme confidence, that "he will be an artist, that has long been settled." (3) And so, despite needing employment rather desperately, he turns down several early job offers as they would take him away from the creative foment of London:

> What is the point of coming all the way from Cape Town to London if he is to be quartered on a housing estate miles outside the city, getting up at the crack of dawn to measure the height of bean plants? He wants to join Rothamsted, wants to find a use for the mathematics he has laboured over for years, but he also wants to go to poetry readings, meet writers and painters, have love affairs. How can he ever make the people of Rothamsted … understand that? How can he bring out words like *love, poetry* before them? (43)

In the portrait of a clever yet insecure and awkward young man, we recognise the largely parodic Romantic stereotype of the wretched, undiscovered, and leaden young artist in the imposing metropolis that is London. In episodes alternately blackly funny and humiliating, Coetzee attempts to meet the right woman through whom he might "be touched and improved." (74) But, to no avail. He comforts himself, quoting Shakespeare, "[f]lowers grow best on dungheaps" (30). Yet, despite his "calling", Coetzee does not succeed in becoming a writer in *Youth* – unable to find the

passionate lover who will unlock his poetic reserves and feeling overly privileged and guilty in his untested-ness, his ability to write poetry dries up. The subsequent realisation that he cannot turn himself into a poet, that he must abandon poetry, contains seeds of moral self-doubt, and a certain bitterness, for by his own reckoning prose can never attain the limitless truths of poetry. "Poetry is truth." (91) Here then is an early encapsulation of Coetzee's anguished and repeated concerns that the nature of the artist and art itself need to be somehow commensurate with each other:

> Why does he make the most ordinary things so hard for himself? If the answer is that it is his nature, what is the good of having a nature like that? . . . .
> It does not feel like nature, it feels like a sickness, a moral sickness: meanness, poverty of spirit . . . . Can one make art out of a sickness like that? And if one can, what does that say about art? (95)

In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee remembers this time of his life as a kind of "nausea":

> …the nausea of facing the empty page, the nausea of writing without conviction, without desire.… I hesitated through the 1960s because I suspected, rightly, that I would not be able to carry the project through. (19)

This kind of conflation of art and morality is usefully unpacked in Martha Nussbaum's examination of Henry James' analogy that "the work of the moral imagination is in some manner like the work of the creative imagination, especially that of the novelist." (*Love's Knowledge*, 148) Nussbaum extrapolates: "The novel itself is a moral achievement, and the well-lived life is a work of literary art." She argues that "certain novels are, irreplaceably, works of moral philosophy . . . [and going further,] that the novel can be a paradigm of moral activity." (148) Certainly in *Youth,* we see a young Coetzee who aspires to certain moral values, and an older Coetzee who in deflates his own early aspirations, creating instead a paradigm of failed moral

activity. And so, if a frequent criticism of autobiography is the (positive) selective memory of its author, Coetzee pulls out some of the most private and ugly facts from his own history – truths that may not be in his interest to reveal. His youthful self is constructed as a sorry package: "[d]ull and odd-looking" (3), naïve and selfish, callous and cold, he repeatedly doubts his ability to truly and passionately love a woman, and gives his opinion of himself as an unattractive, babyish man who is "finicky about sex". (30) And what might be termed ironic for a writer who is so often called "reclusive" (A Google search of "Coetzee and reclusive" garners over three thousand hits. They include these written in 2003 well after *Youth* was published: Slate magazine's headline, 'J.M. Coetzee South Africa's reclusive Nobel Laureate', a story in the UK Guardian about the "reclusive South African", and one by ABC in his adopted country Australia that claimed, "Reclusive writer 'surprised' at Nobel win"), we learn that Coetzee gets a girl pregnant in Cape Town and then behaves badly through her illegal abortion – "…he has emerged ignominiously, he cannot deny it. What help he has given her has been faint-hearted and, worse, incompetent. He prays she will never tell the story to anyone." (35) Later, he reveals a homosexual encounter, after "he allows himself to be picked up in the street, by a man." (79) Still later, he deflowers a young virgin, then is furious at the inconvenience she has caused him and unceremoniously sees her out: "He deserves to be slapped in the face, even to be spat on…Let that be his contract then, with the gods: he will punish himself, and in return will hope that the story of his caddish behaviour will not get out." (130)

The repeated hope that these stories "will not get out" – as well as the undeniable literariness of choosing three sexual encounters from his past that are

fundamentally as "barren" as his unproductive youth - are the clues Coetzee leaves behind; the junctures at which the shameless irony of actually publishing these guilty embarrassments is writ large. This is of course, a deliberate ploy, for Coetzee is more aware than most of the pitfalls of lurking deceits, as his old essay on confession reveals:

> We recognize that we are at the beginning of a potentially infinite regression of self-recognition and self-abasement in which the self-satisfied candor of each level of confession of impure motive becomes a new source of shame and each twinge of shame a new source of self-congratulation…. At the kernel of the pattern lies what Myshkin calls a *dvoinaya mysl'*, literally a "double thought", but what is perhaps better imagined as a doubling back of thought, the characteristic movement of self-consciousness…it is the doubling back of thought that undermines the integrity of the will to confess by detecting behind it a will to deceive, and behind the detection of this second motive a third motive (a wish to be admired for one's candor), and so on. ("Confession and Double Thoughts" 282)

So why does Coetzee do this two-step? If we are to believe him in what he has called his intellectual biography, *Doubling the Point*, he does not fully know the answer. He admits that he finds "the story [he] tell[s] himself has a certain definiteness of outline up to the time of that essay [that is, "Confessions and Double Thoughts"]; after that it becomes hazier, lays itself open to harder questioning from the future." (*Doubling* 392) There are in effect at least two Coetzees -

> . . . [one] is a person I desired to be and was feeling my way toward. The other is more shadowy: let us call him the person I then was, though he may be the person I still am. The field of their debate is truth in autobiography. The second person takes the position [that] . . . there is no ultimate truth about oneself, there is no point in

> trying to reach it, what we call truth is only a shifting self-appraisal whose function is to make one feel good, or as good as possible under the circumstances, given that the genre doesn't allow one to create free-floating fictions. (*Doubling* 392)

In his own autobiography, Coetzee the youth takes up the first position while Coetzee the author assumes the second. The field of their debate is the play between the possibilities and the hesitations, towards what is called the truth. In *Youth*, the possibilities of truth are usually framed within sudden and brief moments of pure illumination when "it is given to him to see himself from the outside." (116) Usually, these insights are not to his liking:

> These flashes of illumination disturb him; rather than holding on to them, he tries to bury them in darkness, forget them. Is the self he sees at such moments merely what he appears to be, or is it what he really is? . . . Is it possible to be dull and ordinary not only on the surface but to one's deepest depths, and yet be an artist? (116)

The one positive illumination that he happens upon in a moment of half-consciousness is greeted with absolute relief, and significantly, with untroubled acceptance, as a true sign of his progress towards becoming an artist:

> It is a state he has not known before: in his very blood he seems to feel the steady whirring of the earth. The faraway cries of children, the birdsong, the whirr of insects gather force and come together in a paean of joy. His heart swells. *At last!* he thinks. At last it has come, the moment of ecstatic unity with the All! . . . .
>
> It lasts no more than seconds in clock time, this signal event. But when he gets up and dusts off his jacket, he is refreshed, renewed. He journeyed to the great dark city to be tested and transformed, and here, on this patch of green under the mild spring sun, word of his progress, has, surprisingly, come. If he has not utterly been

> transfigured, then at least he has been blessed with a hint that he belongs on this earth. (117)

In *Youth* then, Coetzee establishes this central pole in his writing, that both values truth and recognizes that his inherent nature will with "habitual [motion] glance back skeptically at its premises." (*Doubling* 394) In the remaining works of fiction that will be looked at in this thesis, this tension between the two poles is revisited time and again, sometimes coming down on the side of the possibilities and other times, the hesitations. In recognizing this inherent contradiction within himself, Coetzee believes his essay on confession:

> . . . marks the beginning of a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world. . . . The essay, if only implicitly, asks the question: Why should I be interested in the truth about myself when the truth may not be in my interest? To which I suppose, I continue to give a Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of truth. (*Doubling* 394-395)

To invoke the Platonic idea of the truth as something inherent in human nature is to suggest an archetype from which all springs and from which all that has become must again return. In the most common interpretation of this Platonic idea, truth has a crucial link -- a correspondence -- to unchanging reality (such as a fact, or when certain conditions are met, or simply a certain state of being), which is the object of knowledge. In other interpretations, the soul contains absolute truths, but since it is constrained within the material body and its fallible sense perceptions, human beings are no longer able to fully access these unalterable and permanent facts. Coetzee's attempt at moving closer to the truth of himself, even if that truth is necessarily partial (unless surprised by sudden illumination), often tied up in the need for approval, and can only be expressed via a less than pristine human self-consciousness is part of

the evolutionary pilgrimage of man. Which is also to say, the quest for truth is both involuntary and essential, and Coetzee has come down on the side of those who accept that absolute or ultimate truths do really exist in the universe. He does not tell lies although he can and he tells the truth (as best he can) because he must re-collect the knowledge that is his birthright.

But what is the truth that is Coetzee? While *Youth* ends in misery, and in failure to write, we are well aware that it was written long after he had become a very famous writer. When juxtaposed against this obviously verifiable (or absolute) truth, we are led to wonder where the contradictions and gaps might lie in his account of personal history and why Coetzee chooses to recount his youth as a series of "perverse 'free' choices", much the way he describes Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* in his own *Confession* essay (*Doubling* 280). For instance we might speculate that because of the suspicion of "something rotten, something Keatsian" (*Youth* 25) in his sensibility, the real life Coetzee comes up with a version of the high-low combination that is fairly typical of the postmoderns' relations with the world around them. In his case there is a refreshing of the Romantic mode – now made self-consciously complicit – alongside the postmodern one, as he begins writing in a style that is clearly opinionated about the large questions of human duty (what they are, how we go about fulfilling these obligations) even as it avoids saying so directly – preferring the cover of self-reflexivity, irony and parody. According to Linda Hutcheon, "Parody – often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality – is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 93). Yet, as Hutcheon also tells us, postmodernists may reinforce as much as they subvert:

> Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale "nudging" commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as "natural" (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact "cultural"; made by us, not given to us. (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 1-2)

In refusing to fill in the narrative gaps in his life story neatly, therefore, Coetzee may simply intend to shake us out of our usual (natural) reasons for reading an autobiography, which is to find threads of continuity between past and present. Or perhaps more to the point, there is no need to fill in those gaps of a life's narrative because they will always be there, even if apparently filled in to the last minute of the living present. And so, Coetzee-as-narrator is in effect censoring the intervening years (after he quits computers for the life of an academic and a writer) because he has recognized that he cannot turn his private life into an absolutely truthful public document.

To ask, therefore, if his story corresponds to the facts, is not the question to ask, for *Youth* is an experiential exercise in the limits of telling the truth, if you are a being committed to value. And this exercise is contained in Coetzee's most public version of an ongoing private struggle that is defined in truth-telling/aspiring terms. It has to do with the double bind of being caught within but not being satisfied with, "mere rhetoric ('mere' rhetoric)" (*Diary of a Bad Year* 226). It has to do with writers'

obligations and their duties, both to themselves and to this world. In *Youth*, we can find evidence of Dostoevsky's influence in Coetzee's scrupulous attitude towards self-awareness, his enduring self-doubt, and his paradoxical trust in transcendental moments of illumination. The book is carefully set up to interrogate all these issues. In the books that follow – *Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, each with their own autobiographical elements, Coetzee continues to test ideas of "absolute truths" by subjecting his value-committed protagonists to rigorous philosophical, religious, moral and popular attacks. The books themselves are episodic and discursive. It is easy to draw a parallel between them, his to-date most strongly opinionated fictions, and what he has described as the "disillusionment", "boredom" and "impatience" of the other great Russian writer, Tolstoy,

> ... with the novelistic conventions that must be gone through before truth may emerge (a truth that anyhow always emerges as provisional, tainted with doubt from the processes it has gone through), and a (rash?) decision to *set down the truth*, finally, as though after a lifetime of exploring one had acquire the credentials, amassed the authority to do so. ("Confession and Double Thoughts" 293)

In the three books that the rest of this thesis explores, Coetzee too appears ready "to set down the truth". But this truth is never didactic because it is underlaid with the same self-doubts that Youth demonstrates, and because it is subjected to critical debate from seemingly every analytical angle. Coetzee's version of authorship demands that writers come as close to telling the truth as they can, and yet paradoxically insists that authors cannot expect to be listened to without question, if they value truth's relation to reality.

CHAPTER 2

WRITING AS PERFORMANCE: THE AUTHOR AS OTHER

To see authorship as a form of performance is a logical if hardly novel comparison, for the nature of acting is not far out of step from the play of postmodern writing -- or writing that calls to be understood from or with a postmodern (and also modern) perspective. The putting on of "masks," the erasure of self, the implicit contract that it is a fictional world that is being created and entered into are features of both creative acts; it is paradoxically the permanent and eternal space of transience and arbitrariness. J.M Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* provides a strong case for exemplifying and extending this type of analysis. For Coetzee, performativity is both a description of the fictional writer's particular process of writing, as well as a possible means of grasping something he regards as fundamentally important: those paradigms of reality which we recognize as the truth. And, because Coetzee's style tends towards postmodern scepticism, what is true is valued not in factual terms so much as a function of revelation: uncovering possible self-deceptions as in *Youth*, or here unravelling the underlying programmatic structures that make up life itself. Thus *Elizabeth Costello*'s first Lesson on "Realism" contains self-reflexive "stage instructions" about pace, change of scene and details of settings, calling deliberate attention to the artifice of linear narrative time:

> "Now the scene has changed. He has grown up. He is no longer outside the door but inside, observing her as she sits . . . . (4)
>
> "There is a scene in the restaurant, mainly dialogue, which we skip." (7)
>
> "We skip the rest of the foyer scene, move to the hotel." (22)

Richard Schechner writes, "at least since Meyerhold and Vakhtangov" (*Performance*

Theory 72) and definitely by the time of Brecht, directors began exposing the "seams" between script and theatre; the disjunctions between written text and performance. Brecht revealed "the script as of a different conceptual order than the theatre event containing it." (72) To say that Coetzee is effectively breaking down that "fourth wall" between text and reader is to imply that for him, the author's role in calling the reader's attention to the performative process of writing, and honing that critical distance and perspective, is very important. This begins in turn to delineate the kind of art that Coetzee holds to be valuable – art not for cathartic self-identification and release, but art as a means of shaping reality, again Brechtian in the sense of his famous quote "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it".

The trope of performance in *Elizabeth Costello* works on several levels. First and most obviously, the eponymous fictional writer represents the culmination of Coetzee's own forays into acting – before this book was published, he had "played the role" of Elizabeth Costello for nearly half a decade by speaking on her behalf in public lecture circles. Like a performance that is repeated time and again, several of this novel's "chapters" have appeared on other "stages" at other times. Coetzee speaking as Elizabeth Costello at the real Tanner Lectures in Human Values in Princeton University in 1997 and 1998 first delivered Lessons 3 and 4 on "The Lives of Animals" -- a pair of "fictional lectures" at Appleton College, New Jersey. *Elizabeth Costello* is also a novel that could, for the most part, be easily staged, with its structure of orally delivered monologues (such as lectures and speeches) and dialogues. Further, what Richard Schechner calls the "deep structures" of performance are arguably present, as we follow the "performer" Costello as she

prepares/rehearses for her performances, “waits to go on”, then performs. The following passage is an example of this:

> At six thirty he knocks. She is ready, waiting, full of doubts but prepared to face the foe. She wears her blue costume and silk jacket, her lady novelist’s uniform, and the white shoes . . . which somehow make her look like Daisy Duck. She has washed her hair and brushed it back. It still looks greasy, but honourably greasy, like a navvy’s or a mechanic’s. (3-4)

And later, after the performance (of an acceptance speech), Coetzee makes explicit the link between Elizabeth Costello the writer of fiction, and her more obviously theatrical counterparts:

> The applause starts hesitantly, then swells. His mother takes off her glasses, smiles. It is an engaging smile: she seems to be relishing the moment. Actors are allowed to bathe in applause, ill deserved or well deserved – actors, singers, violinists. Why should his mother not have her moment of glory too? (20)

We also witness the spectators’ points of view about her performances (the angry girl whose question goes unanswered, for instance) and their judgements in the aftermath – here an exchange between her daughter-in-law and son:

> Norma snorts. ‘You don’t give public lectures producing pseudo-philosophical arguments for not eating snails. You don’t try to turn a private fad into a public taboo.’
>
> ‘Perhaps. But why not try to see her as a preacher, a social reformer, rather than as an eccentric trying to foist her preferences on to other people?’ (113)

Arguably, these kinds of post-performance evaluations “in many ways [determine] how specific performances feed into ongoing systems of social and aesthetic life.” (*Performance Theory* xviii) And while Costello’s various performances are continually

judged at a meta-level, at the micro-level of writing, Coetzee explores the potential truth quotient of performances through his transformations into the Other. An interviewer asks Costello "'[D]o you find it easy, writing from the position of a man?'" and she replies, "'Easy? No. If it were easy it wouldn't be worth doing. It is the otherness that is the challenge. Making up someone other than yourself. Making up a world for him to move in.'" (12) Costello's dreams of mutuality are authorial dreams, for her greasy hair and old-fashioned suits are merely Coetzee's chosen props for his performance of an imagined being -- renowned writer, estranged sister, selfish mother, passionate lover and social misfit -- he names "Elizabeth Costello": "The blue costume, the greasy hair, are the details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves." (4) In demonstrating his mastery of the Defoe-pioneered realist technique, Coetzee draws our attention to the fact that many of the "signs" that appear to define character and personality are only floating signifiers. While we know many particularities, many signifiers about Costello (for instance that Costello is her maiden name, that she was born in Melbourne and so on), she remains an unknowable quantity, even to herself it would seem. In response to a question "Don't you think so Mrs Costello [sic]?" she says, "'I don't know what I think, … I often wonder what thinking is, what understanding is.'" (90) In other words, the gaps or blanks that we always face in trying to translate Costello or any character into a unified meaning -- impossible to do -- have an earlier origin in the unstable act of authoring her. Just as there is no unifying Costello, there is no unifying or "essential" Coetzee – he is performing Costello, he is Costello-as performer. Just as Coetzee's protagonist refuses to accept categorization, the writer Coetzee too refuses – indeed one might argue

cannot afford not to, if he is to manifest himself into other roles.

For Coetzee then, truth can emerge out of performativity – or put another way, postmodern performances can be truthful ones. It is not that Coetzee is presenting a completely new idea about authorship and performativity -- rather he is drawing our attention to the *performative process* of writing and how that process renders impossible (and unnecessary) the differentiation between fact and fiction. In this sense, we find a parallel to the kind of truth that theatrical performance also offers. Schechner quotes Sanskrit aesthetics as saying performance is illusory, but so is all life. Therefore performance may be formulated as:

> . . . an illusion of an illusion, and as such, might be considered more "truthful," more "real" than ordinary experience. This too was Aristotle's opinion in his *Poetics* where theatre did not so much reflect life as essentialize it, present paradigms of it. (*Performance Theory* xix)

Guilty of presenting just such life paradigms, Costello is "charged" at the end of the book in a Kafkaesque court with the crimes of "non-being", having no beliefs, and turning toward a non-essential existence. The charges bring to mind the doctrine of "privative evil" -- that evil is that which lacks an essence and which, since the time of medieval Christianity, has been linked with acting and mimicry. It is a condition Costello believes necessary to her job as storyteller. And paradoxically, in opposition to the charges faced, Costello sees storytelling as a means of grasping the truth -- truth not defined as fact but rather as what it means to write truthfully, how writing can lead both writer and reader to instinctively recognise "the truth". Here she tries to bring to life mud frogs that she has never seen or heard before:

> She tries a test that seems to work when she is writing: to send out a word into the darkness and listen for what kind of sound comes back . . . The answer: no tone at

> all. But she is too canny, knows the business too well, to be disappointed just yet. The mud frogs of the Dulgannon are a new departure for her. Give them time: they might yet be made to ring true. (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 219)

These are also Coetzee's ideas on writing. In *Doubling the Point*, he says,

> As you write – I am speaking of any kind of writing – you have a feel of whether you are getting closer to "it" or not. You have a sensing mechanism, a feedback loop of some kind; without that mechanism you could not write. . . . Writing, then, involves an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. . . . Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize, or hope to recognize as the truth. (18)

In *Elizabeth Costello* we see examples of what Coetzee means by this kind of writing, through his performances of the Other, for the work presents many examples of performance transformations -- acting in the sense of identifying with beings other than oneself. As much as this borrows from the German idealists and Bergsonian ideas about intuition (ideas explored more fully in the next chapter,) it also evokes that famous method acting approach pioneered by the Russian Konstantin Stanislavsky. Schechner says "the basis of Stanislavsky's great work is to enable actors to "really live" their characters. Nature ought to be so skilfully imitated that it seems to be represented onstage." (*Performance Theory* 46) Schechner goes on to say, "Stanislavsky went so far as to deny the existence of the performance altogether; that is the import of his famous assertion that going to see Chekov's *The Three Sisters* ought to be like visiting the Prozorof household, with the fourth wall removed." (72) Schechner describes performance transformations on stage thus:

> Theatrical techniques centre on . . . incompleteable transformations: how people turn into other people, gods, animals, demons, trees, beings, whatever . . . or how

> beings of one order inhabit beings of another order, as in trance . . . . (xviii)

In strikingly similar terms, Elizabeth Costello's son John describes her authorial powers in the following way:

> '. . . my mother has been a man, ... She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn't that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?' (22-23)

The writer in mimicking/performing the Other -- woman, man, animal, Satan, God -- is attempting what must be done in order to create, to fulfil the function of author-creator. He performs the Other perhaps with the hope of escaping the prison of the self, to be free from being so utterly written as a closed text. One might say Costello wishes to enter a real dialogue with her Creator as does the author with his God. Part of both sets of struggle is the act of creating performance that is separate from the self, the "I" that is performing. Yet that which is created necessarily belongs on a stage not of its own making – something Costello struggles with:

> Inwardness. Can we *be one with* a god profoundly enough to apprehend, to *get a sense of*, a god's being? …*Other modes of being*…Are there other modes of being besides what we call the human into which we can enter; and if there are not, what does that say about us and our limitations? (187-188)

The author -- Costello, Coetzee -- attempts to surmount this paradox by creating a tension of mutual desire between creator and created, powerful and powerless:

> *Desire runs both ways: A pulls B because B pulls A, and vice versa: that is how you go about building a universe*…The gods and ourselves, whirled helplessly around by the winds of chance, yet pulled equally towards each other (192)

Along the same lines of thinking in the lesson called “Eros”, Costello ponders ancient mythic stories of actual physical intimacy between mortals and gods. She thinks: “No one around her has the shamelessness to enquire, *What was it like, how did it feel, how did you bear it*?” (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 187) Here, a mutually desirous relationship between creator and created appears to be structured through the author’s performance of the untranslatable (or forbidden). One could say that in the gaps of translating the immeasurable, Coetzee imagines himself into a God who desires to be loved by his creation, man (and we can compare this with the created character Paul Rayment’s musings in *Slow Man* that, “Presumably, like everyone else, [his author-creator] Elizabeth Costello wants to be loved.” (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 237) – for his creation is a God who would perhaps more acceptably be a man. Or one could say Coetzee tries to imagine himself into a position outside God’s universe, (as did Augustine of Hippo when he asks if it is possible to stand outside heaven and hell, or Dante Alighieri when he created his own version of hell) in order to comprehend better. These are conceivably acts of faith that speak volumes about our human limitations as Coetzee as author struggles to get a real sense of God’s being. We are seeing Gods – at least those in *Elizabeth Costello* – who while omniscient, appear only as performers of that power. “Coetzee” as author faces the insurmountable gaps in his own performance of that omniscience by pointing us towards Gods who paradoxically know very little (despite knowing all, they appear as closed texts), appear to lead boring lives and to need humans to keep them entertained. “What she knows for certain about the gods is that they peek at us all the time, peek even between our legs, full of curiosity, full of envy” (*Elizabeth*

Costello 190). Therefore, necessarily, the mysteries and paradoxes remain in any performance or interpretation of the Other.

In filling the gaps that persist within performativity, we find resonance with a parallel world-view: Wolfgang Iser's theory of interpretation that approaches from the reader's perspective. According to Iser:

> [I]nterpretation reveals something of the human condition, as we never stop interpreting in spite of our awareness that, in the final analysis, there is always something that cannot be transposed into a different register. The very unattainability of total translation does not induce human beings to let go. Consequently, we hang between the very possibilities we try out when we interpret, and hanging between may be the hallmark of the human condition."

Iser's argument (which I paraphrase from Iser, Oort and Te-hsing), aims to open up texts and their possible meanings. He explains that to approach a text with a presupposition that it means one thing or another -- for example, with predetermined ideas about the unconscious -- is to make the text subservient to those presuppositions. However, if we approach a text without the presupposition that there is a, or one, meaning to be uncovered, we attempt to negotiate a position vis-à-vis that text. These negotiations are acts of interpretation and transpose the subject matter -- be it text, God, character and so on -- into a different register. The very act of translating something into another register generates un-translatability. Iser gives the example of trying to interpret something immeasurable like God, Heaven, Hell and humankind into finite terms of cognition. Similarly one can see this happening when trying to interpret human behaviour into a limited set of external signifiers. In all such acts, the space between the subject matter and what it is transposed into can

never be totally “colonized” or “filled in”, unless “authority” is brought to bear upon this space. These blank, untranslatable spaces exist in every act of interpretation. Yet, Iser says, we constantly translate in order to comprehend (in the sense of encompassing and embracing), or to achieve more than was possible before. What cannot be transposed or translated energizes the very act of interpretation and each interpretation, as an act of translation, is dependent on the way in which the space opened up by any interpretation is dealt with. In short the reader is asked to participate creatively when facing those “unwritten” parts – the gaps – of a text. In turn the reader’s imagination will influence the effect of the “written part of the text”. Hence begins a dynamic process, an interaction between text and reader.

While Iser’s theory is concerned chiefly with reader-response criticism, Coetzee-as-author embraces this almost Bakhtinian concept of dialogism in his own writing. Thus far, Iser’s theory has given the reader the power to “climb aboard” the text and while “[the reader] has to accept certain given perspectives [those provided by the author]” it is the reader who “inevitably causes them to interact”, bringing the literary text “to fruition.” (Iser, “A Reading Process”, 282) Iser also quotes Edmund Husserl as remarking: “Every originally constructive process is inspired by pre-intentions, which construct and collect the seed of what is to come, as such, and bring it to fruition.” (Ibid.) Coetzee in *Elizabeth Costello* manages to return some of the responsibility and credit for the *openness* of texts to the author, without necessarily making him an “authority” in the Foucaultian or Barthesian sense. Coetzee never means to say that an author precedes his work in any recoverable origin-of-source way, or that the author himself, rather than his text, is the source of endless significations. Instead *Elizabeth Costello* demonstrates that hermeneutics

can be as usefully applied to the act of authoring as it is to reading, and without returning us to a situation where the proliferation of meaning is shut down. Without preventing the reader from appropriating discourse and meaning for himself, within the boundaries of the construction that is the text, Coetzee shows how acts of interpretation take place all the time at the authorial level. He demonstrates how every act of authoring, creating and story-making is in fact an act of interpretation and translation -- of other texts, of the author's own observations, and even of the memory of the imagined. In this he recalls that shape-shifting writer of the Renaissance, Niccolo Machiavelli, whose response to Dante Alighieri's "knowledge does not exist without the retention of it by memory" (*The Prince*, xix) was to show us how it can be the memory of the imagined: imagined conversations, imaginary people. In one of Machiavelli's many letters to Francesco Vettori after he was removed from the circle of power, he wrote of his inspiration for *The Prince*:

> When evening comes, I return to my home, and I go into my study; and on the threshold, I take off my everyday clothes, which are covered with mud and mire, and I put on regal and curial robes; and dressed in a more appropriate manner I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men and am welcomed by them kindly, …and for four hours I feel no boredom, I dismiss every affliction, I no longer fear poverty nor do I tremble at the thought of death: *I become completely part of them*. [my emphasis] (xix)

Thus in his imagination Machiavelli stands alongside the classic Roman and Greek authors whose words pepper his little manual for princes. He occupies his new role in a trance-like state. Literally he is describing a performance rehearsal (however mystical its origins) – one among the many roles he demonstrates in his book. One might say, Coetzee-as-author does the same in *Elizabeth Costello,* and says so

most explicitly in Lesson Eight, “At the Gate” (193-225). Called upon to defend her existence, Costello finds she cannot find anything essential about her profession: she does not write from experience so much as create a performance of experience -- “I do imitations….” (194) -- be it political, autobiographical, anthropological, or more controversially, of animals and gods. Costello finds no sympathy from the judges, but her author may have a more sympathetic and emphathetic perspective. In *Stranger Shores*, in a piece about Dostoevsky, whose novels Coetzee describes as dialogical, he says, “A fuller dialogical novel is one in which there is no dominating, central authorial consciousness and therefore no claim to truth or authority, only competing voices and discourses.” (*Stranger Shores* 144) Coetzee goes on to remark, “In Dostoevsky’s novels, dialogism is a matter not of ideological position, still less of novelistic technique, but of the most radical intellectual and even spiritual courage.” (145) Furthermore Coetzee’s textual characters – in so far that they are “performers” – can be said to be metonymic of the function of authoring-as-performance – for it is possible to see the writer Coetzee himself as a performer of “competing voices and discourses”, and his creative imagination as the manifold “acting out” or manifestation of “otherness”.

I take Iser’s point that “what cannot be translated energizes the very act of interpretation” to mean that what cannot be fully understood must be created, fictionalized, imagined, guessed at, made-up, dreamt or divined. To author therefore is to put on different beliefs, masks, roles and shapes. The space “that is opened up by any interpretation” is also thus the gap between performer/author and performance/text. It is the permanent space of writing and creating as much as it is the space of interpreting and reading. Coetzee consciously uses ideas about

performance as a means of refocusing attention on the concept of the author, what it means to write fiction and how we make meaning (or not) of texts.

Kafka "At the Gate"

While we have explored the performative transformations that Coetzee demonstrates throughout *Elizabeth Costello*, as signifiers of possibility and even of truth, it is also true to say that in *tone*, this book lacks hope, tends towards disillusionment and even despair. One might say Coetzee, as is his penchant, is denying the author any form of oppressive authority, especially those couched in "educational" Lessons; or one could say he is not at all confident in the powers of the author to make a difference in reality. It is in this sense that a comparison with Kafka is useful, for the possibility of being stalled in a "nowhere", unable to move or think one's way out of the quagmire of existing superstructures of authority, are ubiquitous in Kafka's fiction, where, as David Steinsaltz says, "there are many journeys but few arrivals". In choosing the surname "Costello" for his protagonist, Coetzee taps into a mine of literary significations. Aside from the Irish connection -- we learn that Costello is of Irish stock in *Slow Man* (218, 232) -- which is a link to Beckett, the name's most plangent relation is to Kafka for the root of "Costello" is the Latin "castellum" which means 'castle'. [4] In Kafka's last and unfinished novel *The Castle*, K., a land surveyor, tries to gain admittance into the mysterious fortress but fails no matter how hard he tries. The Kafka parable "Before the Law" presents a similar tale

[4] A linguistics professor from New York University whose name uncannily is John Costello, says that while it is true that Costello is an Irish name, it is also (with a spelling change which usually took place on Ellis Island, which is where immigrants to the U.S. - via New York - were "processed" for many years) Italian; the original Italian is "Castello", and means 'castle'; cf. Latin "castellum".

of a man who tries to gain entry to the law but is refused by a gatekeeper who in the end astonishingly informs him that the gate was all along meant only for him, before shutting it for good. The novel *The Trial* has the main character Joseph K. negotiating totalitarian systems and labyrinthine bureaucracies before being killed "like a dog" in the end. Compare Elizabeth Costello who needs a statement of belief before she can pass through the gate but who is unable to or will not comply. She thinks, "she could be in any of the gulags" (*Elizabeth Costello* 197) and is taken aback when the dour guardian of the gate one day surprisingly "pats her on the arm." (196) Her living conditions are unsavoury: "She is back in the dormitory, lying on her bunk. She would prefer to be sitting, but the bunks are built with raised edges like trays, one cannot sit. She hates this hot, airless room that has been allotted as her home. She hates the smell, revolts at the touch of the greasy mattress." (205) By the end of the Lesson, her flippancy has changed, like K.'s, to fear – thus in Robert Post's phrase, "[f]ear of the authorities is born in [her too]." ("Oppression" 72-73)

These maddening and hopeless quests are most obviously described in the final lesson "At the Gate", but really are there throughout the novel as Costello stands on the fringes of the socializations and the programmed subjectivities that she finds so deeply offensive. The rational sciences and their deadening impact on man's morals, the church and its unquestioned, eternal verities, the university's secular pedestrianism, dietary habits that are unthinking and unnecessarily carnal – in her running battles against all of these Costello finds much that is hideous in Western civilisation and its underpinnings. Her experience of the world is a close cousin of Kafka's protagonists who find themselves caught in a web of mindless bureaucracies, unsympathetic judiciaries and dehumanizing systems. At book's end

the institution of literature begins to be questioned, for as Costello starts to suspect, literariness too can be programmatic and limiting as a means of understanding the world. Hence she finds herself caught in a parody of literary allusions and of certain arrangements of language, of words; it is an intensely surreal, dreamlike reality that is fragmented and isolating but ultimately inescapable. If Kafka's writings have sometimes been interpreted as a religious quest, Coetzee himself deliberately muddies the water in *Elizabeth Costello*, and calls attention to the literariness of Elizabeth's GOD-DOG anagram at the end of that chapter. He refuses to allow the reader to pin down exactly where she might be. Is it the space of nightmare, of alternative reality, of clownish purgatory or of the writer's special fate – the imagined big textual waiting room in the sky? The answer is we do not know and Coetzee refuses to pigeonhole the nature of her experience as a mere search for religious salvation. Certainly it is not recognisably "a return to old verities".

If one cannot reach comfortable conclusions it is a function of Coetzee's intent, signalled very early on in *Elizabeth Costello*, to leave a sense of a continued or continuous journey. On page two, there is a break with the past tense to use "(present tense henceforth)", and even in Costello's journey into the next world -- if that indeed is what it is -- the present tense continues. More complex still, Coetzee's creation of a new space forces the reader to grapple with the inherent contradictions of "At the Gate" and to construct a new reality in order to try and comprehend what is happening. *Elizabeth Costello*'s 'Postscript' is a fitting overarching symbol of the ongoing struggle with the impossible contradictions of life and its imagined aftermath. Costello is inserted into the existing frame of Hugo von Hoffmansthal's "Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon", as the Lord's wife Lady C. It is suggested that like her

husband, Lady C./Costello has also chosen to "abandon all literary activity" (Hoffmannsthal 117) out of an "extremity of faintheartedness and exhaustion permanent inner state." (Hoffmannsthal 120) Indeed, throughout *Elizabeth Costello* we find these themes of extreme disillusionment to be prominent as the "heroine" questions the capacity of human reason to make sense of the world. Midway through the novel, a tearful Costello wonders how life can be as cruelly contradictory as it is:

> …I'm not dreaming. I look into your eyes, … into the children's, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?*' (115)

The reply her son gives her is fully Beckettian in its nuanced fatality: "'There, there,' he whispers in her ear. 'There, there. It will soon be over.'" By making these Costello's personal struggles, Coetzee fuses them with the challenges that face the author-figure. Put another way, there is an insurmountable element to Coetzee's musings on the author, a point beyond which everything might collapse. The author's quest for integrity and truth is therefore, always one of tension and struggle.

CHAPTER 3

IN DEFENCE OF ART: WRITING AS ETHICAL ACTION

> "there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry"
>
> (*Rep*. 607b5-6).

> [Elizabeth Costello's daughter Helen tells her]…what you have produced as a writer not only has a beauty of its own—a limited beauty, granted, it is not poetry, but beauty nevertheless, shapeliness, clarity, economy—but has also changed the lives of others, made them better human beings, or slightly better human beings.
>
> (Coetzee, "As a Woman Grows Older")[5]

In Lessons Three and Four of *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee, via Costello, enters the fray of the old debate between the philosophers and the poets. By using the "ancient quarrel" to posit that the author is in the best position to dissect these myths of culture, Coetzee presents his most spirited defence of the author we have seen in his fiction thus far – which then allows for a "return of the author" as the organic axis for the expressions of belief and doubt within a text. In negotiating this argument, Coetzee appears to defend the author as a creator of ethical writing and further suggests that this type of writing can be executed via powers of intuition, empathy and inspiration. However, Coetzee is also (as always) sceptical if these ethical truths can have any effects on the life of the community, even as he posits and defends them. His negotiation of this contradiction or tension has deep implications for the value of fiction's truths vis-à-vis those of history or of the rational sciences. It also allows the powers of the author to be defined in a somewhat mysterious and more

[5] In this short piece, Elizabeth Costello is reunited with her son and daughter in Nice.

visceral way that eludes rational description. In *Elizabeth Costello* this indirect "channelling" ability of the author is meant to focus our attention on the root causes of human belief and understanding, with a view to exposing falsehoods, rather than on the author's power or authority over his readers. The enterprise may not always work but it is a serious one for Coetzee. In an interview close to the beginning of his career as a novelist three decades ago, he said some works of art "reinforce the myths of our culture, others dissect these myths. In our time and place, it is the latter kind of work that seems to me more urgent." (Wood, 14)

Coetzee refers to the "old quarrel" quite explicitly in the subheadings to "The Lives of Animals": "The Philosophers and the Animals" (59-90) and "The Poets and the Animals" (91-115). As did Plato in his dialogues, Elizabeth Costello too suggests that much is at stake in this argument; that as Charles Griswold's succinct summary in his essay "Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry" puts it, "matters of grave importance in ethics, politics, metaphysics, theology, and epistemology are at stake." But where Plato argued against the "harmful" influence of poetry and saw as "mistaken" its "premises about nature and the divine." (Ibid.) Costello makes charges against the language of the philosophers, whose coolness and rationality mask what she reckons is the true "being of the universe [and of] God." (67) In a reversal of roles, whereas Plato once placed himself against popular culture (in Plato's time, as Griswold notes, poetry was much more influential than what Plato called "philosophy"), the writer Costello finds herself in the minority when addressing her audience of mainly philosophers:

> …although I see that the best way to win acceptance from this learned gathering would be for me to join myself … to the great Western discourse of man versus

> beast, of reason versus unreason, something in me resists, foreseeing in that step the concession of the entire battle. (69)

Costello posits "reason" to be the "less interesting thought" (73*)* that is always geared towards practical fulfilment of needs rather than with pure intelligence. She uses her version of Kafka's story of Red Peter to illustrate this. Costello theorizes that Kafka had read about and based his tale on the real-life chimpanzee experiments of Wolfgang Kohler. Kohler's chimpanzees had to solve problems that involved getting bananas that were placed just out of their reach. Whereas Kohler's results led him to believe that his chimpanzees could solve the set problems by grasping the whole concept or Gestalt rather than being mired by its constituent parts, Costello dismisses his conclusions as mere speculation and suggests that Kohler's experiments interfered with, and consequently circumscribed, their results. She also draws similarities between the Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan and Kafka's Red Peter. On its Web site, the University of St Andrew's School of Mathematics and Statistics describes Ramanujan as "one of India's greatest mathematical geniuses" and yet, because he was untrained in the formal sense of writing a mathematical proof, "many of his results remain undemonstrated to this day" (68). The anecdote calls attention to the fact that the inability to be conversant in the protocols of communication is the root cause of keeping "us" and "them" separate, at the expense, perhaps, of a higher truth.

Costello's critique is not the usual one against Gestalt psychology that the whole cannot be different from the sum of its parts, but rather that the parts -- the individual thoughts that may run through a chimpanzee's brain or an untrained mathematician's mind -- are never considered of value in the first instance. The

possibility that Sultan might be capable of thinking many more sophisticated thoughts than the mere basic one of how to survive, or that Ramanujan was capable of thinking mathematical truths that were unproven in the conventional sense, were never contemplated by the psychologist or the Cambridge scholars. That range of thoughts is accessible, she suggests, to the poets. By logical extension, poets -- authors -- are capable of having valuable thoughts that deserve to be communicated and understood by their audiences. Costello in her defence of poets, seems to be saying something different from ascribing originating intent or meaning to the author. She is instead suggesting that authors are a kind of honest broker, a transmitting vessel for life's many voices.

For Costello's own apparent access not only to Sultan's thoughts, but also to the fictional Red Peter's, (and potentially Ramanujan's) seems to be achieved via a Bergsonian intuition. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics,* Henri Louis Bergson describes intuition as "the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it" (23-24). As Clifford Williams notes, "The one who uses intuition is the true empiricist, [according to Bergson]", and "true empiricism is that which proposes to get as near to the original itself as possible"(Bergson, 36). In intuition, one "search[es] deeply" into the object and "feel[s] the throbbings" of it (Bergson 36-37). Although Bergson adds that intuition such as this is "consequently inexpressible", Costello demonstrates that it is only a lack of imagination that might lead to such a conclusion. Using the philosopher Thomas Nagel's famous mind-body dilemma about the ultimate impossibility of occupying another's body and therefore another's mind, Costello contends "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the

being of another." (80) She gives as example her ability to think her way into a fictional character, that is to say, *one that has never existed*, as proof that she can therefore surely think her way into beings with which she shares "the substrate of life." (80)

These ideas about intellectual sympathy and the use of intuition are not new, coming out of the German idealist tradition of the nineteenth century which felt that science should be intuitive and that history be about the power of the imagination. Wilhelm von Humboldt said,

> The artist's imitation … proceeds from ideas, and the truth of shape appears to him only by means of these. The same must also be true of historical imitation, since in both cases it is nature which is to be imitated. The question is then only whether there are such ideas which are able to guide the historian and what they might be … . [T]hese ideas arise from the profusion of events itself … through a consideration of these events which is undertaken with a true historical sense. ("Foundations: Language, Understanding, and the Historical World", 111)

Do Elizabeth Costello's ideas offer something new to the notion of the author's relevancy? Her approach alludes to the subject of ethics by outlining her commitment to a number of values. It focuses on the fracture between the philosophers and the poets, (which is arguably a parallel battle to the present one in literary circles that pits reader/text against the author) to defend the author's right to speak and be heard. While philosophers (and psychologists, as well as scientists) have long used animals to prove their theories, she uses animals to demonstrate, via poetic intuition, her beliefs and moral judgments about the way humans should live their lives. Whereas Plato accused poets of rhetoric that was harmful because it seduced the irrational parts of the audience's psyche and was out of touch with the

rational rules of nature, Costello's argument posits that it is only through the exercise of intellectual sympathy and poetic intuition that humanity can truly rise to its fullness of being, in step with the being of the universe.

In a sense, she teeters at the edge of the trap set by Plato when she chooses to portray the deep psychic conflicts of those who are suffering and who do not, or cannot, respond philosophically. In "Plato and Poetry" G .R. F. Ferrari notes that,

> "It is not the passing tremor caused by the sound or appearance of the imitation that [Plato] considers dangerous, but the deeper fear of which it is a symptom—a fear which can hold sway over an entire life …. For if my heart swells as I watch son part from mother, or lovers lose their chance of happiness, it swells not only for the characters but for the human situation to which the performance gives me access: I weep that sons must part from mothers, that things should be so." (134, 140)

But ironically, because Costello vividly portrays the plight of *animals* rather than that of suffering humans, she avoids falling into that trap; the danger of putting her audience into an emotionally empathetic state does not transpire. On the contrary, the responses to her lecture in "The Philosophers and Animals" range from hostility and irritation to sheer incomprehension. And so, by using animals as the main crux of her argument, Costello manages to achieve two things: she avoids being accused of appealing to the baser emotions of her audience but simultaneously she reveals that a *lack* of empathy (towards animals) can be equally viewed to be a danger to the higher reaches of man's soul and his humanity. Whereas Plato would have said, in Griswold's words, "The poets help enslave even the best of us to the lower parts of our soul; and just insofar as they do so, they must be kept out of any community that wishes to be free and virtuous. Poetry unregulated by philosophy is a danger to soul

and community", Costello demonstrates that the opposite statement can be equally true.

As a defence of poetry, Costello's might be said to be a new, even ingenious argument. Paradoxically Coetzee chooses to portray the argument as a failure; it does not come off in spite of Costello's imaginative prowess for there is a patent lack of persuasiveness to her whole performance. At the end of the chapter on "The Philosophers and the Animals", the dean of the college that invited her to speak poses a question that implies he did not understand anything of her lecture. He says,

> …vegetarianism is a very odd transaction, when you come to think of it, with the beneficiaries unaware that they are being benefited. And with no hope of ever becoming aware. Because they live in a vacuum of consciousness. (89)

The statement leaves Costello looking "confused, grey and tired and confused." (89) Nevertheless she attempts one last response, only to be interrupted by her daughter-in-law – a philosopher of mind – who dismisses her arguments as shallow relativism and denies the possibility of stepping outside reason. Perhaps an even worse response is an angry note received later and written by a fellow poet; he sees the comparison Costello draws between Jews during the Holocaust and cattle at the slaughterhouse to be deeply wrong and terribly hurtful.

Is the point we are being asked to consider the narrow one that Costello is not an artful rhetorician or is it the much broader assertion that the rhetoric of ethical writing always falls short? She does much that is wrong, if one were to judge her by the standards Plato sets up in the *Phaedrus*, regarding rhetoric. (In one of Socrates' most famous images, a good composition should exhibit the organic unity of a living creature, "with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs;

and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work." (Griswold, "5.1: Rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*")) Costello's speech lacks organic unity and coherence, if her audience's reaction -- "'She is rambling. She has lost her thread.'" (75) -- is to be accepted as logical. Second, her discourse is read from the written word; it is not dialogical. According to the *Phaedrus*, this is not the best way of communicating knowledge because it does not allow the audience - especially an audience that comprises philosophers, to use the question and answer mode of 'Socratic dialogue' to get at the latent truth that is said to be within each soul. Indeed Costello's question and answer sessions lead to more confusion, the dean and the questioner look "nonplussed" at her response (82) as the few times she engages in debate turn out not to be exercises in defending and communicating knowledge so much as exchanges that are even more obfuscating for the questioners. When asked for clarity she responds with "'I was hoping not to have to enunciate principles…. If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says.'" (82)

Her son thinks her talk "ill-gauged, ill argued. Not her *metier*, argumentation." (80) It appears to be a judgement based on the old Socratic belief that the failure to persuade indicates that the speaker does not know the nature of the human soul and further, that one cannot "reach a serious understanding of the nature of the soul without understanding the nature of the world as a whole." (Griswold, "5.1: Rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*") Costello herself thinks she has slipped into an other-worldly-dimension that enables her to see people as they really are -- "participants in a crime of stupefying proportions" (114); she is, unsurprisingly, unable to convince her

audience in this world of the truth of her visions. No one appreciates her insights. It is a marginalised position and one, it would seem, of powerlessness.

And yet Costello is, curiously, undefeated in several intriguing ways. For one thing, not winning an argument makes her less of a Sophist and more a seeker of truth. Second, she decides to engage the philosophers on their turf but she undermines the legitimacy of that engagement by sidestepping the rules of how it should proceed. Refusing to engage in the Socratic give and take in any sense, and stubbornly withholding attempts to account for herself, she thus keeps alive the struggle between the poets and the philosophers. Her arguments, though attacked from various rational interpretive stances, remain impervious precisely because she appeals to a notion of intelligence that cannot be "tested" or "proven" beyond a leap of faith or a belief in the power of the imagination. Also, while her uncertain rhetoric may be unpersuasive to her particular audience, she continues to hold these searching conversations in her mind as it were and her discourse, halting and muddled as it can be, is in pursuit of the truth. In other words, while Costello is portrayed as a poor persuader to an audience of philosophers, Coetzee allows the potential truth of her utterances to remain largely unquestioned on their own basis. Her rhetoric, although decidedly un-philosophical and not even merely popular, maintains its own comprehensive moral, metaphysical, psychological and epistemic worldview.

Costello is undefeated in another sense: as an evangelizing vegetarian she lives her beliefs, and refuses to separate her public lectures from her private practices. Here too, she stands as an opposing argument to Plato's refusal to accept a separation between private virtue and the regulation of public life. Where he used it

to justify keeping poets out of any society wishing to be virtuous and free, she claims to practise it in order to save her soul. She does so from the position of an outsider looking in, to try and prove to herself that she surely cannot be living in a society whose meat-eating people:

> . . . are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions [and yet who] every day … produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to [her]. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money. (114)

To both Greek philosopher and Australian writer, separated as they are by time and belief, the virtue of society -- the battle for its very soul -- is at stake.

Costello could be said to envision herself as representative of the poet/writer/scientist/animal – even to be their exegete, or interpreter par excellence, in trying to communicate "the truth" to an audience of unbelievers. Not unlike Ion's encounter with Socrates, where Ion's interpretive expertise of Homer's vast cast of characters is questioned, Costello too puts on a performance that requires her to represent and enact various characters who cannot be consulted as to the accuracy of her statements: in Lesson Three, Kafka's fictional ape Red Peter, the real chimpanzee Sultan of Kohler's experiments, the idea of the bat in Nagel's musings, the killers in Nazi death camps, the cattle about to be slaughtered; in Lesson Four, it is Hughes' jaguar and Rilke's panther in the zoo and Swift's fictional Houyhnhnms. How are we to judge her indefensible performances? One way is presented by Socrates: that poets and their explicators are divinely inspired. Socrates concludes that Ion must have been possessed by Homer's works and gripped with a creative madness in interpreting them; Homer himself, like any poet, is not a knower, but a

kind of transmitter of a divine spark; he is “a light and winged and holy thing.” (Adams and Searle, *Critical Theory*, 12).

Costello seems to allude to a version of this mysterious inspiration when she talks of Hughes’ poems which she says “ask us to imagine our way into [the body’s] way of moving, to inhabit that body.” (96):

> By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. (97-98)

In the sense that the poetic invention that Costello refers to is one that lacks self-consciousness and intellectualism, she is tapping into both the Socratic explanation of an external divinity as well as the Romantic notion of creative production that locates divine inspiration within the poet. Tracy Ware suggests that “the conception of poetic inspiration described in the *Ion”* is Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “greatest debt to Plato” (533). He asserts that Plato and Shelley are similar in that both see the poet as divinely inspired and that their difference lies in where each locates that inspiration: Socrates describes an external divinity, the Muse, while Shelley locates divinity, as inspiration, within the poet.

In Ware’s article, he quotes Shelley’s translation of *Ion* thus:

> Therefore God takes reason from poets, and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses the pronouncers of oracles and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves, who utter these priceless words while bereft of reason, but that God himself is the speaker and that through them he is addressing us. (533)

As both writer and interpreter, Costello displays certain powers of divination and originality that apparently have little to do with knowledge or reason. This appears in

keeping with eighteenth century Romantic ideology where the author was seen to be the source of original ideas and fiercely individual beliefs that often set her apart from the society she lived in. Costello cuts a solitary and isolated figure for believing that human beings should refuse to submit to limitations of the intellect, a belief that is portrayed as beyond human comprehension in these chapters. At the close of Lesson Four, Thomas O'Hearne, a professor of philosophy says,

> 'You can be friends neither with a Martian nor with a bat, for the simple reason that you have too little in common with them. We may certainly *wish* for there to be community with animals, but that is not the same thing as living in community with them. It is just a piece of prelapsarian wistfulness.' (110).

Costello's son describes her response to O'Hearne as full of "acrimony, hostility, bitterness." (112) In the tradition of the nineteenth century idealists, she declares that "'Discussion is possible only when there is common ground. When opponents are at loggerheads, we say: 'Let them reason together, and by reasoning clarify what their differences are, and thus inch closer. They may seem to share nothing else, but at least they share reason.'" (112) As von Humboldt pointed out:

> Every act of comprehension of a subject matter presupposes, as a condition of its possibility, the existence of an analogue in the person who comprehends of that which is subsequently comprehended – a preceding original correspondence between subject and object. … Where two beings are separated by a total gap, no bridge of understanding extends from one to the other; in order to understand one another, they must have, in another sense, already understood one another. ("Foundations", 112)

To Costello, the concept of "reason" which underpins the tradition of philosophy and, in particular philosophy's dianoetic nature, cannot solely act as that bridge of

understanding between O'Hearne and herself because the employment of reason in the context of their exchange is an exclusionary gesture. Again, she allies herself with the German Romantic hermeneutical tradition. Von Humboldt says that "philosophical history" tends to apply its own external ideas to events, which is a mistake:

> Historical accuracy is threatened much more by the danger of philosophical treatment than by that of a poetic one, since the latter is at least accustomed to giving its material a certain degree of freedom. Philosophy prescribes a goal for events; this search for final causes, even if one wishes to derive them from the essence of man and of nature itself, disturbs and distorts any free view of the characteristic effect of historical forces. Teleological history, therefore, never attains to the living truth of world destinies, because the individual must always find the peak of his development within the span of his own fleeting existence. It therefore is not able to locate the ultimate purpose of events in that which is living, but rather seeks it in lifeless institutions and in the notion of an ideal whole. ("Foundations", 112)

Through Costello's battles, Coetzee is again drawing our attention to a facet of writing that he considers abiding, namely that the kind of truth a poet offers is not the same as the historian's. Some of Coetzee's musings on this subject appear in his review entitled 'Portrait of the Monster as a Young Artist', on Norman Mailer's fictional biography of Hitler, *The Castle in the Forest*. In that review he says that while using "the spirit and methods of fictional inquiry to gain access to the truth of our times, [is] an enterprise that may be riskier than the historian's[,] [it] offers richer rewards." He also points out that the writer/poet understands that there are limits to what we will ever know for a fact but is willing to make that "leap from fidelity to the

real to intuitive insight"– a step that is necessary, to reveal insights that mere historical record cannot; and "to search out and speak the truth of our moral life." In *Elizabeth Costello* we might conclude, the author succeeds in imaginatively creating an ethical and possibly deeper alternative to the truths of philosophy and history. Coetzee on the other hand, paradoxically succeeds in demonstrating how relativist her enterprise is, and how impossible it is to expect such a thing as shared values. For he is only too keenly aware, as he said in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, of "the power of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination, which, whether he likes it or not, has its residence in his body." (99) In spite of this, the "ideal author" for Coetzee is not a complete relativist and will always strive to communicate a hierarchy of values that rival the accepted norm. In this regard, the author feels responsible towards his fellow beings although his influence on his society may only be felt far into the future if at all: to write ethically is a risky enterprise.

In the next chapter on *Slow Man* the focus of fictional inquiry is "foreshortened" to look at the effect of the author's presence within her own writing. Now the intuitive insights of the writer are not only put to the test, but are found to be misplaced, over-reaching and by book's end, of questionable merit and strength. These kinds of "reversals" in judgment are perhaps a natural movement within Coetzee's meditation on the author, given his wont to seek out irreducible truths about the self's motivations while simultaneously operating in a state of almost hyper self-awareness regarding the fine line between inquiry and inquisition.

CHAPTER 4

THE FADING POWERS OF THE AUTHOR: WRITING AS DENIAL OF POWER

In his Nobel Prize lecture (2003), delivered two years before *Slow Man* was published, Coetzee imagines the relationship between writers and their creations:

> How are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes? . . .
>
> He yearns to meet the fellow in the flesh, shake his hand, take a stroll with him along the quayside . . . But he fears there will be no meeting, not in this life. If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east. Or better, that they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave.
>
> 'He and his Man' (18-19)

In *Slow Man* Elizabeth Costello is given the chance to "meet the fellow in the flesh" when she appears at Paul Rayment's house one day. She even shakes his hand to be sure their "two bodies would not just pass through each other." (81) She concludes that her doubts over the nature of his being are "naïve", and concludes Rayment and her "are not ghosts." (81) Indeed, "her man" Rayment may paradoxically be a character more fully embodying reality, truth and autonomy than Elizabeth herself. Thus Coetzee's positing of character autonomy is accompanied by the parallel idea of a reversal of power between author and character. In doing so, there appears to be a significant rethinking about some of the ideas about authorial

performance and instinctual inhabitation of the Other that we find in *Elizabeth Costello*. In the earlier novel, the focus is on the very act of creation, of bringing to life a textual character, an animal, another being or state of mind, through poetic intuition. Here, the final act is handed to the textual character Paul Rayment, who asserts his autonomy by exercising his right to say goodbye to his author Elizabeth Costello. In this book, the author is not compassionate but meddling, bullying, and self-centred; she trespasses upon her textual character's inner life; she is crude in her eagerness for her character to undergo experiences which she deems interesting, although they are plainly distressing for him. In *Slow Man*, there is real searching for a defined difference between author and character. The emphasis is no longer on a laudable empathy between creator and created but upon the dignity of *difference* and independence.

Slow Man is an immensely provocative study of what a fictional character's relation to his maker is and can be. The subtext - on resisting mastery, on mastery's inability to survive - is *demonstrated* in brilliant fashion, through a web of intertextual relationships that underscores the made-up textuality of what we consider to be real or true. Rayment is a textual being, made up of an obsessive pattern of repeated words -- "words imitating the pattern of other words" in a "rhythm of doubt" (this was Coetzee's own stylistic observation of Beckett's *Watt*, in his Ph.D. thesis at the University of Texas at Austin in 1969 (Atwell, "The Problem of History")) -- his creator's doubt over the capability of language to express "the truth". Yet while his maker flounders in a sea of provisionalities and dissatisfaction, he is able to discern what is true by holding fast to a system of beliefs. It is not a stretch to see *Slow Man* as a continuation of the Kafka-esque waiting room at the end of *Elizabeth Costello*.

Here, as there, Costello is being called upon to defend her non-essential being while the character she has dreamt up is resonating with the same truthful "realness" as those belling mud frogs after a torrential rain.

Coetzee has talked about the way "writing writes us", as "[w]hat it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place." (*Doubling the Point*, 18) This idea of being led by writing, of the created having some measure of control over the creator, is explored in this chapter by tracing the intertextual references to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the epistolary form, the French drama of Racine, Wallace Stevens' poetry, and the writings of Robert Musil. The reason for paying close attention to these intertextual references -- all examples of the way "automatism" is "built into language: [and] the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves" (*Doubling*, 18) -- is because they have a large part to play in the growing sense of autonomy on Rayment's part and the fading powers on Costello's. This is an important point, for language's automatism has tended for Coetzee to be a symbol of his dissatisfaction with his means of expression whereas here, it contributes to making meaning in a substantive way.

Literary Precursors

> Full fathom five thy father lies;
> Of his bones are coral made;
> Those are pearls that were his eyes:
> Nothing of him that doth fade
> But doth suffer a sea-change

Into something rich and strange.

The Tempest. Act i. Sc. 2.

On page 100 of *Slow Man*, we read Paul Rayment's interior monologue, born of confusion, as his "maker" Elizabeth Costello tries to bully him into a "story" that she finds more interesting:

> It is like a sea beating against his skull. Indeed, for all he knows he could already be lost overboard, tugged to and fro by the currents of the deep. The slap of water that will in time strip his bones of the last sliver of flesh. Pearls of his eyes; coral of his bones.

On page 237, we hear again echoes of this sentiment, this time, with a creeping sensation of dawning awareness:

> Presumably, like everyone else, Elizabeth Costello wants to be loved. And like everyone else faces the end gnawed by a feeling that there is something she has missed. Is that what she is looking for in him: whatever it is she has missed? Is that the answer to his recurring question? If so, how ludicrous. How can he be the missing piece when all his life he has been missing himself? *Man overboard!* Lost in a choppy sea off a strange coast.

The echoes of the song "Full Fathom Five" from *The Tempest* (one of Shakespeare's last romances) is interesting on a few levels. First, and most obviously, is the link to performativity, to the art of the theatre, and of acting from script. Next, the elided reference to paternity signposts a key concern in this book, that of the source of creativity and creation itself. Where we come from, the stories we tell ourselves or are told of our beginnings, what constitutes our "histories", are all central themes. If Rayment is the "father" of his own fate, he does not yet know it at this point of the

story; he is not a literal father although he dearly wishes to adopt the Jokic children. Indeed, there is the constant presence of author Elizabeth Costello hovering over him, seemingly the source of his being and yet never totally in control of his actions and thoughts.

We expect the allusion to Ariel's song to segue into an opportunity for true love to burgeon; however in this case it is a jarring and ugly break instead, as the next chapter opens upon the encounter, both comic and sadly tawdry, between Rayment and "Marianna". (102-114) Nevertheless the high degree of meticulous design, aided by the inexplicable, that brings together Miranda and Ferdinand on the one hand, and Rayment and Marianna on the other, makes a cogent point about parallel universes peopled by performers of the scripted: essentially puppets controlled by powers beyond their comprehension. It is remarkable just how scripted this episode is, beginning with Elizabeth Costello mocking Paul Rayment's writing of letters to his Croatian nurse Marijana, saying the age of the epistolary novel is over:

> 'A letter! Another letter! . . . *This is not the age of the epistolary novel* [emphasis mine], Paul. Go and see her! … life is not an exchange of diplomatic notes. . .. *Au contraire*, life is drama, life is action, action and passion! … Surely you, with your French background, know that. …Think of French theatre. Think of Racine.' (227)

Mention of the epistolary form recalls the seventeenth century Franciscan nun Marianna Alcoforado, the supposed writer of one of history's most famous epistolary novels. In the sexually explicit *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, she was purportedly victim of her own passions. After an affair with a Frenchman became known in public circles, he abandoned her to a rigidly penitential life in isolation. Some believe that Alcoforado's life story was a fictionalised account by a male writer, although a real nun by the name Marianna Alcoforado might also have existed. The sad tale of

romantic passion gone scandalously awry, the haziness surrounding the story's very foundations, and of course the matching names, bear satirized and undeniable similarities to the encounter between the apparently blind and lustful Marianna and Paul Rayment, who is of French origin although not as dashing as Noel Bouton, the Marquis de Chamilly, anecdotally was. At one point, in cheeky allusion to the first Marianna, the one who was a nun, Coetzee has Rayment muse that the "sturdy" brassiere his visitor wears is "the sort of thing he imagines Carmelites would wear." (106) The novel's Marianna -- with the two *ns* – as we are deliberately reminded by that spinner of fictions Elizabeth Costello (98), and again by Rayment himself eleven pages later, is a character of questionable background and dubious reality. Costello, herself the result of a fictionalised act by the male writer Coetzee, sets up the encounter between the two (which very nearly takes place at "Alfredo's" which irresistibly draws the ear and eye to "Alcoforado"). At the level of this fiction within a fiction, there is a question regarding reality: "Was Marianna Marianna or was Marianna Natasha?" (116) asks Rayment, who is blindfolded throughout the strange meeting and who later wonders whether the woman he was with was truly the blind Marianna or some paid prostitute "coached … in a charade" (116) by Costello. And indeed, when we revisit the episode, the narrative appears cleverly constructed in order to include gaps that fuel these later suspicions. When Marianna "cries", Rayment hears "a gasp that is presumably a laugh, and the laugh brings on sobs" (111) – he later wonders whether her trembling was not just an effort to hold back the giggles (116). When Rayment wonders if Elizabeth Costello is "still in the room [with them], observing, checking up", Marianna replies, " 'No, … there is no one here.'" Rayment puts the reply down to the extra sensory sensitivity of blind people,

but we can easily read his other theory, that Marianna/Natasha is a prostitute who is not blind, into this exchange.

On the meta-narrative level, there is a comment writ large about fictional conventions surrounding reality. Coetzee alludes to both the performative (or theatrical) aspect of reality and the reality contained in novel writing. First Costello lectures Rayment about what "life is" – "life is drama, life is action, action and passion!" (227) –and, to drive the point home further, she urges him to think of theatre and in particular, of that French master of plays who according to Martha Fletcher Bellinger "induced the action to its bare bones -- no underplots, no digressions, episodes, or characters extraneous to the main action" (*A Short History* 174), Jean Racine. Racine wrote eleven tragedies and one comedy around his favourite theme, the passion of love. Ironically, while Costello claims that his work is "about confrontation, one huge tirade pitted against another"(227), Fletcher says Racine in fact "avoided windy, rhetorical declamations and 'purple patches,' and expressed complex things with ease and beauty. . . . As Corneille was more concerned with events, so Racine was more concerned with character." (Ibid.) The slippage, presumed as intended, is one more "myth of creation" that Coetzee/Costello floats into the ether of his/her construction, awaiting the deflation that awareness must surely bring to the equation – that reality on stage is no reality at all, focused as it is on unrelieved action and with rule-bound stories.

Second, mention of the epistolary novel is highly suggestive from the perspective of writing fiction. One argument for its use was that it could add greater verisimilitude to a story as, the Brittanica Concise Encyclopaedia explains, "[i]t allows the author to present the characters' thoughts without interference, convey events

with dramatic immediacy, and present events from several points of view." The encounter between Rayment and Marianna encapsulates, nominally, a regular fictional occurrence – characters performing a real-life meeting, complete with the phenomenon of a disappearing author. The treatment here is comic and literal. So we have Costello the omniscient author saying, "As soon as I have delivered [Marianna] I will slip away…. I won't be back until tomorrow or even the next day. Goodbye." (102) The fictional characters believe – as does the unimaginative reader – that they are on their own but Rayment, who is temporarily blinded by his author Elizabeth Costello who uses heart-shaped lemon leaves for the deed (The School of Natural Healing's Web site HerbalLegacy.com tells us lemon balm has traditionally been used to treat "distress, nervousness and irritation"), says with surprising insight for a textual being, " 'We are on stage, in a certain sense, even if we are not being watched'…. But in a certain sense they are being watched, he is sure of that, on the back of his neck he can feel it."(103)

The strange episode allows Coetzee to achieve three things at once: call attention to the fiction of omniscience; point out the unquestioning acceptance of narrative "realism" on the part of the reader, who figuratively allows himself to be put in the dark as much as Paul Rayment literally does; and through the deliberately bizarre parameters of the set-up, mock the absurdity of this novelistic convention and implicitly the contract entered into by the author and the reader. Rayment whose name he says rhymes with *vraiment* and not *payment* (192) is the embodiment of the conventions of realism, reality and "the real" that the novel explores and explodes. Held captive to the ideas and whims of Costello, at least at this point in the novel, he is humiliated and lashes out at the Australian writer:

> 'You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you. You should open a puppet theatre or a zoo. Buy one, and put us in cages … Rows and rows of cages holding people who have, as you put it, *come to you* in the course of your career as a liar and fabulator.' (117)

Now we see the *canis* in *canis infelix* that Paul Rayment uses to describe himself can mean not just dog but also "subordinate" or "the lowest throw of the dice". The parallel relationships between controller and the controlled, master and slave, author and character, scriptwriter and performer, God and man, go to the heart of what we accept as "real" – for each of these sets of relationships, the latter party acts on the perceived or direct orders of the former. "Real" life slips in between the cracks, unnoticed because deemed "uninteresting" and without purpose. The purpose-driven life is the central cry of all who believe in the systems that control them. Thus rationalized, we find these words of advice from Elizabeth Costello the writer-creator, to Paul Rayment, the character-creation:

> Let me tell you what you see . . . An old woman by the side of the River Torrens feeding the ducks . . .. In reality you see a great deal more – see it and then block it out. Light of a certain stridency, for instance . . .. Unnecessary complication? I don't think so. An expansion . . . The rhythm of life . . . I urge you: don't cut short these thought-trains of yours … Follow them through and you will grow with them . . . [here she quotes a fragment of Wallace Stevens] . . .. Hence this little lesson I am trying to teach you. *He finds her by the riverside, sitting on a bench, clustered around by ducks that she seems to be feeding* – it may be simple, as an account, its simplicity may even beguile one, but it's not good enough. It does not bring me to life. [Not] [b]ringing me to life . . . has the drawback of not bringing you to life either. (158-9)

The fragment of Stevens is key here (Costello says, “What was it that the American poet fellow said? There weaves always a fictive covering from something to something.” She is quoting the final stanza of Stevens’ “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”, *It Must Change*, Canto VIII), capturing in essence Coetzee’s return again and again to the question of writing “*the truth*”, about the self in *Youth*, performed in *Elizabeth Costello*, and here, seemingly at a dead end. In his essay “The Quest for the Fiction of an Absolute”, Michael Bryson notes that:

> "A fictive covering" always interposes itself between subject and object, weaved "from the heart and mind" of the subjective consciousness. The *fiction* of an absolute is as close as we can approach to an absolute in this formulation.

Some forty pages on, Costello is back again, nagging Rayment to be an interesting story, and to save her by being one:

> ‘As I try to impress on you, our days are numbered, mine and yours, yet here I am, killing time, being killed by time, waiting – waiting for you.’
>
> He shakes his head helplessly. ‘I don’t know what you want,’ he says.
>
> ‘Push!’ she says. (*Slow Man*, 203-4)

Now, from the perspective of the fictional character, the phrase from “nowhere to nowhere” would appear to be especially on target as intuitively, the text cannot meaningfully assert its authority, despite exhortations to “Push!”. Arthur Lindley puts the point across succinctly, using the example of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath:

> Because she is herself a text, there is no experience in her history with which she could refute authority that is not itself derived from authority. Manifestly, her experience can neither affirm nor deny what the books say because, being a product of those books, she can have only the “experience” in them. The loop is closed. (*Hyperion and the Hobbyhorse*, 53)

And yet here Coetzee appears to be doing the unimaginable. He begins by evoking the idea of playing God, of creating something from nothing – of bringing something to *life*, of making it *real* -- and extrapolates its presence in novelistic form to encompass the God-like creative qualities of the author. Coetzee then undermines and complicates this parallel in two ways. First in quoting Stevens, he taints lofty ideas of gaining access to an absolute reality with deep scepticism, suggesting that all is subject to an intervening subjective and fictionalising process. What is actually given birth to, the suggestion appears to be, is less important than the act of doing so. At their core, both God's and man's creations are only comprehensible as "stories" whose truth or falsity we cannot know. Second, Coetzee reverses the equation between God and author by urging the *created* to bring the creator to life. It is Paul who is asked to "Push!" and the exclaimed directive unavoidably alludes to the process of "giving birth". Indeed Coetzee invests the created with hitherto unsuspected powers to resist, and to expand, the realms of possibility: to allow the scales to fall from one's eyes as it were, and to live more fully in step with the true "rhythm of life". It is no news that Coetzee has always been at pains to distance himself from authoritative interpretations of his own work and commonly shies away from being a traditional figure of authority, preferring to treat his creations as though they possess a life of their own. Asked in an interview with David Attwell for Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter* what Elizabeth is trying to say in the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello*, "The Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon", Coetzee responds:

> I tend to resist invitations to interpret my own fiction. If there were a better, clearer, shorter way of saying what the fiction says, then why not scrap the fiction?

> Elizabeth, Lady C, claims to be writing at the limits of language. Would it not be insulting to her if I were diligently to follow after her, explaining what she means but is not smart enough to say?

To say that the object that is given birth to (man, or in this instance, a character in a novel) has independent life of its own and ought then to be respected, regardless of its actual physical or mental origins, is an important if fairly pedestrian point. However in Coetzee's latest novels, the denial of authority takes on a new dimension with a complex sense of omniscience and omnipresence. What *is* interesting here appears in the form of an "expose" of the very lack of extraordinary enlightenment that we normally expect of our creators. God and the Author are not to be capitalised -- they are to be seen in fact as *dependants* of a kind, and of leading desultory lives. Indeed Elizabeth Costello is literally accused of "rambling" (*Elizabeth Costello* 75) and the book itself – the object of creation -- might be described as digressive - the South African writer Roy Robins in his review for the *New Statesman* magazine has rather peevishly described it as "a collection of essayistic short fiction masquerading as a novel." (Robins misses the point that the reader is perhaps *meant* to work at completing meaning for the novel, including why it does not "feel" like conventional novel writing) While there is some power of omniscience regarding beginnings and ends, it is their creations that truly live for the main part, and who are consequently parasitized by their creators. It is the myth of creation turned on its head, it is the structure of myth deconstructed, and the stories and fables that lead to all creational myths hauled out into the sunlight as it were, to see if they truly "come to life" – or if they fail to, with the consequence of, as Elizabeth Costello points out to Paul

Rayment, “[Not] [b]ringing me to life . . .[which] has the drawback of not bringing you to life either.” (159)

Taking these ideas a step further along, we see that reconfiguring what we previously accepted as a subordinate, made-up thing, a mere fictional character under total control of his author, can logically give him a subjective reality of his own. It is hence no wonder that the “author-character” Elizabeth Costello steers the conventionally subordinate “character-character” Paul Rayment, away from writing letters, for the utterances that we find in epistles tell, as Ian Watt reminds us, “of an intimate world of which no one speaks out loud in ordinary life, … the familiar letter, … exclusively addressed to one person.” (*The Rise of the Novel*, 198) Reading letters, like a diary entry, immediately gives one access to this private world, and with it we succumb to the best illusion of all: narrative not as constructed but as an unreserved, full, personal reality. Writing letters to Marijana would render Rayment *real* and it would ironically exclude Elizabeth Costello who is in the business of creating literary illusions of reality with its necessarily public orientation. Costello needs Rayment to tell *her* his intimacies in order to make an interesting character for her novel and its readers. Furthermore Costello cannot afford for Rayment to become, or realise that he is, “real”, and thus independent of her control. The fact that he can and does assert this private perspective is a major theme of the novel.

An important moment when the textual meets the real involves the choice of the word “labile” (209). The adjective means several different things from being open to change or adaptable (as in an emotionally labile person), to (from chemistry), constantly undergoing or likely to undergo change: unstable, as in *a labile compound. The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*’s online

book tells us that etymologically it is an old word that comes from Middle English *labil*, meaning forgetful, wandering, from Old French *labile*, from Late Latin *labilis*, meaning apt to slip, from *labi*, to slip. Coetzee employs the word in a way that almost overwhelms it with layer upon layer of meaning. Paul Rayment, an Australian of French origin, is disabled (and thus unstable in a physical sense) after an accident on page one of the novel. As an immigrant who does not feel at home ("Home … What does that mean?" [197]), he is the classic "wanderer". Usually reticent, a literal slip in the bathroom (on page 205) leads him to become recklessly open (also in the sense of *a slip of the tongue*) – "I speak my heart too openly. I say too much" (209) about his feelings for his nurse Marijana Jokic. Costello, who made Rayment up, expects him to be in essence an unstable compound, who is nothing if not "open to change" as he is *textual* not human; because he is textual, he is constantly under pressure to *do* something in order to be interesting '"[m]aterial for a book" (197). Rayment however, sees his condition of being labile as much more essential to his being. He tells Marijana: "If you find me labile . . . it is because every now and then the stranger who says 'I' breaks through the glass and speaks in me. Through me. Speaks tonight. Speaks now. Speaks love.' (210) When Marijana responds with a blush, being labile for Rayment becomes joyous evidence that a coherent, even divine logic at work – his life has meaning, it is not just a random story whose premises are figments of Costello's imagination. In the moment of his epiphany, Rayment becomes "real", even if his musings are ultimately untestable. From this point onwards in the book, Rayment's real-ness overtakes Costello's. *He* asks her:

> 'Now let me ask you straight out, Mrs Costello: Are you real?'
>
> 'Am I real? I eat, I sleep, I suffer, I go to the bathroom. I catch cold. Of course I am

> real. As real as you.' (*Slow Man* 233)

The last words – "'[a]s real as you' draw attention to a convention regarding what is to be treated as belonging to the real world." Coetzee's words on the Austrian writer Robert Musil, published in 1986 at the height of apartheid in South Africa, prove instructive in this instance:

> To live and function in the world of the rational, we must deliberately banish from our awareness the irrational that lies dense under our feet and about us. We must accept a convention regarding what is to be treated as belonging to the real world. Such a convention will define everyday language. ... However, … accepting the fact of a linguistic contract should not mean that we are committed to the repression of the irrational. Like Ulrich, the hero of *The Man Without Qualities*, *we can maintain a certain reserve toward the real world, a living sense of alternative possibilities.* [my emphasis] ("On the Edge of Revelation")

From Rayment's perspective, the unsettling idea of becoming aware of the existential nothingness beneath his feet also opens up the realm of possibilities and of imaginative and non-conformist choices. Where Kafka and Beckett explored the realm of stasis and nightmare, Musil turns more towards relishing the possibilities of action. He is altogether more in tune with Coetzee's mood in *Slow Man* where the textual character Rayment is the one who finally succeeds in playing the game of reality.

Viewed from a broader perspective, Coetzee reveals two abiding facets of his authorship in *Slow Man*: first, the high regard he holds for creating uncommon worlds through sheer acts of willed imagination - worlds that are made up with his own rules and boundaries; and second, of wanting to exert influence upon the "real world", perhaps even intending to turn the reader's mind - despite denying this intent (When

Tony Morphet asked, 'Whom are you seeking to create as the ideal reader of *Life & Times [of Michael K]*?" Coetzee replied, "I wasn't aware that I have ever taken care of my readers. My ideal reader is, I would hope, myself." His reply alludes to T.S. Eliot who famously defined the ideal audience of the artist as "the one hypothetical Intelligent Man who does not exist") - by showing him these worlds of "alternative possibilities." Coetzee has identified two capabilities of narrative from the author's perspective: that of taking control of time and of self-referentiality, which he describes as "the absorption, in radical metafiction, of reference into the act of writing, so that all one is left with on the page is a trace of the process of writing itself." (*Doubling the Point*, 204) He has spoken of the sheer pleasure he experiences in the act of writing: "[T]here is a definite thrill of mastery – perhaps even omnipotence – that comes with making time bend and buckle, and generally with being present when signification, or the will to signification, takes control over time." (*Doubling*, 204) He now appears to be experimenting with another capacity of the act of writing: narrative's potential to paradoxically deny authorial power by allowing most spectacularly, the fictional character, to take control of signification, therefore altering the writer's experience of time. Elizabeth Costello moves from an unflustered "'Leave you alone? . . .If I left you alone – . . . , what would become of you?'" (126), to a teary "But what am I going to do without you?" (263) by book's end. In this sense the writer and the character exchange positions of power and control.

Therefore, if what we take to be real life occurrences are shown to be artificial set-ups -- human-constructed acts of narrative, whose only aim is to prod and provoke the created being in one direction or another, in the name of making a good story out of life --then as much as fictional beings (and by now it must be said we

ourselves) might be gazed upon and bamboozled by our creators, the gods and authors are also constricted by what their creations choose to do or not do. Coetzee has managed to invest the verb "to create" with both a sour barrenness and a clownish carelessness that is highly provocative. The character as the created Other is portrayed with relative dignity and sympathy. These ideas are developed in *Elizabeth Costello* via a trajectory that traces the importance of poetic intuition, the ability to subsume the self and completely enter the spirit of the Other, and which finally arrives but not without a troubling paradox, at a profound denial of mastery.

If the author is seemingly trumped by her creations here, in the next chapter on *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee appears to sketch a limited if hopeful possibility of non-directed agency. As Rita Barnard has noted, Coetzee's novels contain a "rigorous sense of their own limitations, as well as their muted utopian dimension." "'[Y]ou can choose,' says Drago" (*Slow Man* 179), and having meditated upon the "slow man" – the one who is well-intentioned but "too old-fashioned" and perhaps likely "to only have the slightest and most belated effect on the life of [his] community" ("Jerusalem Prize" 99), Coetzee is moving on, turning the puzzle that is authoring to a task that is altogether more engaged with the world around him. This is also in line with Coetzee's ruminations on writers as thinkers and public intellectuals, a theme examined in the final chapter.

But before that, a thread in *Slow Man* deserves unpacking, for its contribution to Coetzee's preoccupation with "the truth". Here, not only is Coetzee giving the created character autonomy, he is also associating him with historical reality -- as opposed to his author/creator who trivializes the episode because she only sees its value in the context of *a* story to be told.

The Original

As *Slow Man* draws to a close, we are presented with the dilemma of a stolen (or borrowed) photograph. Its replacement copy has a digitally inserted picture of the father of the thief (or borrower). The episode invokes and comments upon issues of intrinsic value that are raised in that famous piece of cultural criticism, Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". The novel's protagonist Paul Rayment is a former portrait photographer and has in his possession a priceless collection of what he calls "first-generation" photographs of "the early mining camps of Victoria and New South Wales." (48) Several of these are said to be by the great Antoine Fauchery[6] and it is one of Fauchery's group photographs that is taken by his housekeeper/nurse Marijana Jokic's son Drago, for a bit of modern re-invention.

In an early exchange with Drago, Rayment is driven "close to tears" (177) as he contemplates one of these old photographs. He sees them as being "[p]art of [Drago's and his own] historical record" and which "may, like a mystical charm – *I was here, I lived, I suffered* – have the power to draw them together." (177) By Rayment's reckoning, the mystique of the photograph sounds much like the aura of a painting or sculpture in Benjamin's musings. The quasi-sacredness which derives from the absolute uniqueness of an original work of art is here applied to the way "this distribution of particles of silver … records the way the sunlight fell, one day in

[6] Coetzee is doing some fairly plausible historical invention of his own, by claiming that Fauchery was honing his skill as a photographer when he took these photographs in Rayment's collection. He may have done, as the Australian Dictionary of Biography online Edition tells us the Frenchman had worked on the Ballarat goldfields in Victoria between 1852 and 1854. Nevertheless there is no existing historical evidence that Fauchery took photographs during this period, and it is generally believed that he only became involved in photography after he left Australia in 1856.

1855". (177) Those familiar with Benjamin will recognise the irony of this comparison as photography was deemed to have destroyed the concept of the original, since any uniqueness is diluted by the possibility of reproductions. Here, Rayment is lauding the first photograph, and only the first one.

Part of the moral of the story, at least from Rayment's point of view, is that Benjamin's conclusions were mistaken to suggest that reproductions are to be valued for their democratizing value. Rayment sees no value whatsoever (even that afforded by humour), in Drago's modern reinvention of Fauchery's photograph. This is partly because Rayment is a "slow man", behind the times and old-fashioned in his aesthetics; his computer does not even possess a modem (he does not know what one is, instead keeping a computer as a modern form of typewriter). He is also the "slow man" because the past – that historical record - retains its hold and importance, indeed is what gives him current relevance and context. Drago's tomfoolery may reflect how little of the past the young man retains and how perhaps irrelevant he, a Croatian immigrant, sees its values as being to his current Australian surroundings. Whereas Martha Rosler, in her essay "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience" says "photography heading for the galleries must be reseen in terms of its revelatory character not in relation to its iconic subject, but in relation to its 'real' subject, the producer" (*Decoys and Disruptions* 37), here, Rayment's reaction reveals most of all, his own values. Drago, by casually displaying blown-up copies of the photographs in his room takes Rayment's precious Fauchery out of its original context, thus severing its link to the past.

For Rayment, at stake is the issue of "the real", of the truth of what the photograph captures, and its absolute authenticity. As an immigrant to Australia,

Rayment, (and perhaps Coetzee too) is demonstrating his respect for the country that has accepted his presence. Unlike the white colonists in South Africa who passed a "long string of laws regulating all phases of social life" and who only expressed their love freely for "*the land*, that is, toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers" ("Jerusalem Prize" 97) Rayment is filled with what can only be called love for the people who represent Australia's past, "a people with a story of their own, a past." (52) He may "have been overtaken by time, by history" (179) but there are some values which he deems absolute, and his precious Fauchery photographs are a symbol of these. And yet, in the manner of Coetzee's concern with the doubleness of truth-telling, Rayment wonders:

> But is that the truth? Would the woman in the picture accept him as one of her tribe – the boy from Lourdes in the French Pyrenees with the mother who played Fauré on the piano? Is the history that he wants to claim as his not finally just an affair for the English and the Irish, foreigners keep out? (52)

The yearning for fraternity and the fear that it is unearned, the wariness of accepting history's fictions on face value - are still informing Coetzee's writing, and the overarching rubric is the unequal relationship between two sides of a story – past and present, master and slave. For real parity to take hold, the unnatural structures of power must be exposed if not destroyed, as *Slow Man*, in its meditation on the author-character relationship, has addressed.

CHAPTER 5

THE PERSONAL, POLITICAL AND ETHICAL: WRITERS AS INTELLECTUALS

In the final chapter of this thesis, Coetzee's representation of the author figure undergoes its perhaps most defined shift that we have seen in his fiction so far. *Youth, Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* explored different dimensions of Coetzee's long-held insistence that novelists present a unique and potentially more valuable discourse than history (or other forms of "master discourses"). In *Youth* we saw how "novelistic texts" can be "a kind of historical text with a truth-value that requires a fairly sophisticated mode of interpretation" ("The Novel Today", 2). In *Slow Man*, Coetzee demonstrated the ability of storytelling to make and change its own rules. In *Elizabeth Costello*, despite the protagonist-novelist's prowess in creating a rivalling discourse to history, her arguments are largely portrayed as vain as she cannot command the authority of consensus. Now in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee's latest protagonist is given a more ideal set of parameters within which to express his individual experience of historical time. In "The Novel Today", Coetzee defined two capabilities of fictional writing that orthodox history cannot manage to do:

> . . . orthodox history does not have the means to give the kind of dense realisation of the texture of life that the novel, or certain kinds of novels, do so well. And history does not have the formal means to explore, except clumsily and 'from the outside', the individual experience of historical time, particularly the time of historical crisis. (2)

JC, the aging, ailing writer-protagonist of *Diary of a Bad Year* is afforded just such formal means when he is commissioned to write a series of essays about what is wrong with the world today. However, in keeping with Coetzee's refusal to place a

higher value to the truth in fiction, JC also discovers that his opinions are out of step with the next generation's interests and their modes of being. This by now familar narrative situation is described by David Attwell as "the tripartite architecture that surfaces in much of Coetzee's fiction, … is predicated upon the *subject* (frequently a subject living in a body, often a body in pain, marked by contending social forces, a body from which the subject feels alienated); *history* (as a field of contestations, of "torsions of power," in Coetzee's phrase, in which the subject never feels at home); and *language* (as a field of representations which are subject to processes of cultural obsolescence and renewal)". ("Coetzee's Estrangement", 3) [my emphases]

Nevertheless, we are encountering something different here, undeniably so. In attempting to delineate what this is exactly, I begin with the question of positioning, of the underlying attitude towards literature and writing. Something has shifted here, and it is tempting to suggest that Coetzee has had a change of heart about the fractious question of "political engagement with the issues of the day". What is strikingly different about this book is first, its structure, second, its temporal currency which also dates the book, fixing it within a time-space continuum the way most of Coetzee's other works do not (for instance, naming political leaders who are still, or were during the book's writing, in power, as well as the ongoing situation in Iraq, *et al*), and third, its directness in confronting the issues *du jour*. Upon first reading, the book is a curious oddity for Coetzee, who is usually fairly allusive and hermetic. Here is JC, who is openly political and confronting/engaging the political issues of his time with almost violent frankness. This book seems to say, even within the fairly cautious and characteristic framework of "writing within writing" (JC is employed to write a set

of “strong opinions” for a book of that name), that this is what a writer can do when writing within a “free” society.

In keeping with Coetzee’s tendency to balance the possibilities against the doubts of writing “the truth”, the last point does not detract from the underlying theme in *Diary of a Bad Year* that questions the sealed/unchanging nature of “opinions”. After the episode where Anya is insulted by JC and refuses to be his typist any longer, he writes to her contritely, but as he admits to himself, dishonestly, calling her “the natural mother of the miscellany of opinions [he] was putting down on paper”. (*Diary*, 124) JC confesses that:

> [t]he passions and prejudices out of which my opinions grew were laid down long before I first set eyes on Anya, and were by now so strong – that is to say, so settled, so rigid – that aside from the odd word here and there was no chance that refraction through her gaze could alter their angle. (125)

However, on the next page, we hear that his German publisher Bruno is:

> . . . still wavering between calling these little excursions ˆ*Meinungen* or *Ansichten*. *Meinungen* are opinions, he says, but opinions are subject to fluctuations of mood. . . . *Ansichten*, by contrast, are firmer, more thought out. In our last communication he was tending to prefer *Meinungen*. . . . Best to leave the question open. What interests the reader more, anyhow, is the quality of the opinions themselves – their variety, their power to startle, the ways in which they match or do not match the reputations of their authors. I disagree. *Ansichten* is the word I want, I say. *Harte Ansichten* . . . (126 – 134)

And to complicate matters, JC reflects that,

> What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya is not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions. As I read through what mere

> hours before she translated from a record of my speaking voice into 14-point type, there are flickering moments when I can see these hard opinions of mine through her eyes – see how alien and antiquated they may seem to a thoroughly modern Millie, like the bones of some odd extinct creature, half bird, half reptile, on the point of turning into stone. (136-137)

By page 142, JC is saying, " I should thoroughly revise my opinions, that is what I should do." And then, this, in his postscript to Anya:

> *PS*, I wrote. *Some news. I am beginning to put together a second, gentler set of opinions. . . . Some of them take up suggestions that you let drop. A gentle opinion on birds, for example. . . .*(145)

Coetzee draws both our eye and mind to this question of how opinions and preoccupations change according to their intended audience. What is important, interesting and finally abiding in our lives is not an assembly of objectified thoughts projected upon the external world (and this appears to be a pointed rebuke to writers who are overtly political), for little weight can be assigned to thoughts which can be influenced by another person or by one's own moods and circumstance. Opinions are finally only crafted – they do not spring from an unchanging truthful source. There is a certain bitterness that accompanies this conclusion, as JC is made to feel out of step with the times, old fashioned. He realises his fluid ideas of how the world works (or does not), may never resonate with those that matter (the next generation), and in the end may be as "culturally obsolescent" as is language itself. What does abide is a collection of highly personal opinions that are about one's private life and observations therein, and also largely untranslatable memories.

But still the question lingers whether JC is able to make some change to his environment and to what degree and hopefulness. Following Coetzee's tendency in

his late twentieth/early twenty-first century books to portray a central character who edges close to and often overlaps with his own physical, intellectual and emotional markers, *Diary of a Bad Year* has, in JC, an almost twin. Many have remarked upon this fact, and most have concluded (inconclusively) that Coetzee both is and is not the character in the novel. However, there is a whiff of the red herring in letting the matter lie there. For the more Coetzee revisits this way of writing, using characters who share his profession, his achievements, his country of origin (and current Australian residency), his causes, his initials, his general age-group and even, as in the case of Elizabeth Costello, his real life audiences (he has spoken *as* her at several public lectures), the more he himself becomes that character in his novel who does not fit into society. If he cannot comfortably be said to be *the* subject of his own fiction, he can most definitely be said to be calling attention to himself, to his own subjecthood - which is among the various definitions of the function of the middle voice, according to Greek scholar A.T. Robertson:

> The only difference between the active and middle voices is that the middle calls especial attention to the subject. In the active voice the subject is merely acting; in the middle the subject is acting in relation to himself somehow. What this precise relation is the middle voice does not say. That must come out of the context or from the significance of the verb itself." (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 804)

In Coetzee's own brief "A Note on Writing" (1984) he calls attention to the verb "to write":

> To write (active) is to carry out the action without reference to the self, perhaps, though not necessarily, on behalf of someone else. To write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do-writing) with reference to the self. (*Doubling,* 94)

Coetzee makes two points that are relevant to my purpose here. First, he suggests that Roland Barthes' discussion on the verb "to write", focused as it is on "the grammatical oppositions past versus nonpast, transitivity versus nontransitivity, and active versus passive" might simply be "academic propaganda for a postmodernist practice of writing". Barthes' suggestion is that "today to write ...is to leave the writer (*le scripteur*) inside the writing, not as a psychological subject . . . but as the agent of the action. "[T]he field of writing ... has today become nothing but writing itself." (*Doubling,* 94) Second, Coetzee says the passive construction "A is-written-by X" can be seen:

> . . . as a linguistic metaphor for a particular kind of writing, writing in stereotyped forms and genres and characterological systems and narrative orderings, where the machine runs the operator. The three voices active, middle, passive may then be thought of as a cautionary chorus always to be lent an ear when one is doing-writing. (*Doubling,* 95)

For Coetzee then, the literary implications of the linguistic category of a middle voice are much more complex and of significant personal importance, than any (linguistic or theoretical) analysis has shown recognition of so far. The way the construction of both active and middle grammatical structures are identical is troubling to him because of the unquestioned acceptance of what the subject "I" means, and further, that that "I" is "independent of, and untouched by the verb ["to write"] – and of the relation, or lack of relation between subject and object." (95) Coetzee recognizes the determinism of linguistic structure and, by using the middle voice in a way that calls attention to the author-figure and his complex place within his own writing, seeks to escape its limitations by calling attention to the artificiality of such syntactical

barriers. Extrapolating from Coetzee's reflections on doing-writing in the middle voice, Brian Macaskill argues that:

> If . . . Coetzee's project involves an attempt . . . to render . . . unnatural . . . the distinctions between transitive and intransitive, active and passive, theoretical speculation and literary practice in *these terms*, then the items of speculative linguistics . . . cease to be marginal appendages to his novels and have to be reconfigured in terms of the centrality from which they were previously imagined to be displaced. ("Charting J.M. Coetzee's Middle Voice", 70)

It is possible to say perhaps, that through this underlying structure of a middle voice, all of Coetzee's key characters leave a reader with a renewed sense of what it means to be an author in this world. But importantly and differently, *Diary of a Bad Year*, as part of what I call Coetzee's late-phase (a phase which I believe begins with the fictionalised memoir *Boyhood* published in 1998), offers us Coetzee's perspective of what it means to be *him*. This is not the same as assuming that the actual substance of what Coetzee writes is what he himself believes or even intends to put across. It is instead the hermeneutic mining of the grammatical notion of the middle voice. Where Coetzee flirted with the bare outlines of this idea by calling his memoirs "fictionalised", and where he started to build the bones of his case in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*, he makes the boldest leap in *Diary of a Bad Year*. Somewhere between and beside the active and the passive, is a third voice – the voice of the author (as he shows in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*) but more fundamentally, as he tries to show in this book, the inner voice of a human being.

Whether this can be seen as part of the humanist enterprise, or at least a contribution to the debate over the relevance of the humanities, whose end goal may be "to improve the lot mankind" (*Elizabeth Costello*, 132), I do not know. What is

certain is that the voice of the author is given its due, as a seeker of truths in spite of all its uncertainty and moments of blindness. Given the explicit "return of the author", the final section of this chapter explores the public dimension of this role: the writer as public representative and intellectual.

Writers As Thinkers

In "On having thoughts" in *Diary of a Bad Year*, J.C. wonders, "But do I really qualify as a thinker at all, someone who has what can properly be called thoughts, about politics or about anything else?" (203):

> If I were pressed to give my brand of political thought a label, I would call it pessimistic anarchistic quietism, or anarchist quietistic pessimism, or pessimistic quietist anarchism: anarchism because experience tells me that what is wrong with politics is power itself; quietism because I have my doubts about the will to set about changing the world, a will infected with the drive to power; and pessimism because I am skeptical that, in a fundamental way, things can be changed." (203)

JC's brand of political thought finds undeniable echoes in Coetzee's own brand of sceptical engagement with the world: both share an inclination to subvert established conventions, including those that dictate what history should be, from a position at the margins. Given Coetzee's tendency to write himself out of any fixed axis - giving himself less and less authority to speak – it is remarkable and perhaps ironic that his cultural standing has steadily risen to undeniable greatness. The latter development, owing much to the international recognition afforded him by the Swedish Nobel committee in 2003 (as T.S. Eliot said at his banquet speech in Stockholm fifty five years earlier, it is "the highest international honour that can be bestowed upon a man of letters") and the British Booker prizes (in 1983 and again in1999), has

inadvertently placed the mantle of a much wider responsibility upon Coetzee. To quote Eliot's speech again, Coetzee has for a time, become a kind of representative symbol:

> A ceremony takes place, by which a man is suddenly endowed with some function which he did not fill before. So the question is not whether he was worthy to be so singled out, but whether he can perform the function which you have assigned to him: the function of serving as a representative . . .

But representative of what and for whom? Fame has brought detractors. For instance in Roy Robins' review of *Elizabeth Costello* he says, "*Elizabeth Costello* is crowded with academic and literary in-jokes, and echoes of other writers (Milan Kundera, David Lodge, A S Byatt). Although Coetzee attempts to satirise current intellectual trends, this novel is ultimately uncomfortably complicit with the world of literary celebrity and the academy." Part of Coetzee's rebuttal to this type of criticism is to lend his name to various causes over the years, foremost among them to "effect a change in the present sad, sorry and selfish treatment of animals," as he wrote in 2007 for an exhibition opening of *Voiceless,* a fund set up in 2004 that wants to stop factory farming in Australia. Coetzee is a patron of the organization. In March 2008, Coetzee spoke out against the Canadian commercial seal hunt in an interview with The Humane Society of the United States. In the interview available on the society's Web site, he says, "My initial reaction was of horror, like most people's - horror at images of big men beating helpless little creatures with beautiful dark eyes to death." Coetzee has also long lent his increasingly weighty name to various petitions, usually those calling for the fair treatment of fellow writers and intellectuals. In January 2009, BBC News reported that Coetzee signed a petition demanding the immediate release of Chinese intellectual Liu Xiaobo. As a writer, these ethical

issues relating to social and political practice have long found their way into his fiction, albeit in more allusive fashion. Now, in *Diary of a Bad Year* (and to a large extent in *Elizabeth Costello* also) we see the most direct infusion of self – and that self's relation to a particular and recognizable social-political context - that Coetzee has allowed his characters so far. Unsurprisingly, this creeping confluence of the private and public has led to Coetzee being increasingly hailed as an important and perhaps even influential public thinker.

In *Diary of a Bad Year* (and also in *Elizabeth Costello*), Coetzee comes close to fulfilling his own criteria for a public intellectual, by thoroughly debating current trends in politics, philosophy and academia in a way that not only contextualizes these issues within their respective histories, but also holds to account the individual's responsibility. Coetzee says:

> Humankind is the only species that has a past—has that past in the sense of being able to give it a conceptual shape and in some sense own it. People function as intellectuals in social discourse insofar as they relate our present and our future to our past. Their discourse, to put it roughly, has a certain historical breadth. More than that, intellectuals tend to see themselves as ultimately answerable to history, that is, to a future from which they will be seen as belonging to the past. ("Critic and Citizen: A Response")

Coetzee worries about "ultimately being answerable to history" – in the most basic sense he is a firm believer in the importance of grasping the history and past achievements of art forms before embarking upon their creation. As Verity Edwards noted, writing for *The Australian* newspaper, when Coetzee addressed an audience of international vice-chancellors at the Association of Commonwealth Universities Conference of Executive Heads in Adelaide in 2006, he cautioned that "[t]he mere

fact that schools of art and programs of writing and so forth were flourishing under the wings of universities should not therefore lead us to believe that all is well with our faculties of arts and humanities," and asked, “Should we be worried that the graduating students are equipped to write novels and stories and plays for today's literary market but not well informed about the history of these forms or about what has been achieved in the forms in the past?" He called it a question that had “long disturbed him”. Coetzee himself writes self-consciously and allusively and uses “words with the full freight of their history behind them”, as he says in his essay called “Speaking in Tongues” (published in *The Australian* on 28 January 2006). His words implicitly carry the burden of multiple literary associations as well as the load of a personal past and present; all these make his writings, so straightforward on the surface, dense with depths of meaning and connotation.

He also feels that he is answerable to history in a more profoundly personal sense. We know from the various pricks of conscience and personal remorse (“*Agenbyte of inwit” - Youth*, 130) that he holds himself up to social standards that are defined by a sense of idealism. Further, he has made a decision in these later books to share those ideals, and from a position of influence. Elizabeth Costello is all about “lessons” that she – and Coetzee – wish to float and discuss and debate. For example, Costello wishes to be vegetarian “out of a desire to save [her] soul” (89); in the lesson called “The Problem of Evil” she urges her audience not to read books that seem touched with “absolute evil” – “It is something that can only be experienced. However, I am recommending to you that you do not try it out. You will not learn from such an experience. It will not be good for you.” (176) In *Diary of a Bad Year*, J.C. delivers judgement on thirty-one topics ranging widely from America

and terrorism to theology and the afterlife. Despite being told that these are views meant for publication – the section heading is “Strong Opinions” - the latter half of the book is called “Second Diary”, and the book itself is of course called *Diary of a Bad Year*. Diary entries, as we noted in *Slow Man*, are like reading letters, in that they immediately give one access to a private world, and the sense that we are seeing the narrative as an unreserved, full, personal reality – Coetzee’s as much as his characters’.

If a public intellectual has ideals to share, it is perhaps with the goal of re-shaping reality and righting the wrongs he perceives. We can hazard quite reasonably that Coetzee is attempting the same, with the relatively recent responsibility that “representative-ness” has thrust upon him. And yet paradoxically, Coetzee’s journey is a largely private one, too wary of the provisionality of opinions to unreservedly thrust them into the public sphere. The following passage is J.C.’s (and, Coetzee’s – given the critical response to his late works) thoughts on this topic:

> During the years I spent as a professor of literature, . . . I would cheer myself up by telling myself that at heart I was not a teacher but a novelist. And indeed, it was as a novelist rather than a teacher that I won a modest reputation.
>
> But now the critics voice a new refrain. At heart he is not a novelist after all, they say, but a pedant who dabbles in fiction. And I have reached a stage in my life when I begin to wonder whether they are not right – whether, all the time I thought I was going about in disguise, I was in fact naked. (*Diary of a Bad Year*, 191)

The critics’ words may sting and Coetzee may never wear the ‘pedant’ or ‘didact’ mantle with ease, given his expressed scepticism about the values of public life and his wariness with the label of authority. No matter, for inwardly Coetzee, as he gets

older, may be shadowing a writer he has long considered great – Tolstoy. In J.C.'s words again:

> . . . if we follow the standard account, Tolstoy entered upon a long decline into didacticism that culminated in the aridity of the late short fiction. Yet, to the older Tolstoy the evolution must have seemed quite different. Far from declining, he must have felt, he was ridding himself of the shackles that had enslaved him to appearances, enabling him to face directly the one question that truly engaged his soul: how to live. (193)

The metaphoric mention of enslavement and shackles immediately recalls Coetzee's Jerusalem Prize speech, and whether purposefully or not, conflates Tolstoy's (guessed-at) thoughts with Coetzee's own. Without a doubt, the seeking of answers to the question of "how to live" fills the pages of all four works that have been the focus of this thesis. In the attempt, Coetzee shapes himself within his own historical continuum, in conscious recognition that he is ultimately answerable to a future in which he will belong to the past. This consciousness is Coetzee's very definition of an intellectual.

But a fundamental question remains: is Coetzee a worthy intellectual? Is he a broad authority on life, a wise old sage? J.C. frames the problem in fictional terms:

> In the novel, the voice that speaks the first sentence, then the second and so onward – call it the voice of the narrator – has to begin with no authority at all. Authority must be earned: on the novelist author lies the onus to build up, out of nothing, such authority. (149)

In *Youth,* the young Coetzee had no authority to speak of. In Slow *Man*, the novelist author Elizabeth Costello was repeatedly shown to have not earned her authority – authority, J.C. reminds us, cannot simply be achieved by "tricks of rhetoric" (150) but

by some altogether more mysterious process (which she may or may not have partially achieved through her performative transformations in *Elizabeth Costello*). And in *Diary of a Bad Year*, J.C., while enjoying a modest fame, has like Elizabeth Costello intrinsically heretical ideas about many issues. Both J.C. and Elizabeth Costello therefore, lack representativeness and the attendant legitimacy and power that it affords – both therefore, are portrayed as meagre masters of authority.

What then of Coetzee? His persistent dance with self-doubt and self-scrutiny makes him a complicated figure of authority, one not given to motivating or even real teaching. However, his ability to build "out of nothing" many extraordinary works has led to his being labelled an authority – a great writer -- in most academic and many popular circles. In these late books, Coetzee himself does seem to be opening to the possibility – or at the very least is not evading the possibility -- that he may, at times, be a writer who writes with great authority. This stance is arrived at through his rigorous meditation on the *private* figure of the author in the aspects examined in this thesis – how the writer sees his essential task as that of writing truthfully, the performative powers of the writer, writing as a form of ethical action, and the paradoxical denial of authorial powers. The confluence of these factors can be said to address at a meta level, the difficult if not impossible quest for truthful self-knowledge: Coetzee's own quest to truthfully evaluate himself, even his own greatness. Perhaps only the future's judgement of him will tell if he has succeeded, but to J.C. the best last word on the subject, for now:

> What the great authors are masters of is authority. What is the source of authority, or of what the formalists called the authority-effect? . . . what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be

oneself and beginning to speak vatically? . . . The god can be invoked, but does not necessarily come. (*Diary of a Bad Year*, 151)

CONCLUSION

> To know a work of literature is to know the soul of the man who created it, and who created it in order that his soul should be known.
>
> J. Middleton Murray

> Wer den Dichter will verstehen
> muß in Dichters Lande gehen.
>
> Goethe

In an important sense – important both for the reader and it would appear, for Coetzee himself (Goethe's quote prefaces *Youth* and roughly translates as "those who wish to truly understand the poet must first understand where he came from") – the four books examined in this thesis contain important clues for those looking to understand and evaluate Coetzee's choices and methods. Though he might not agree, it is an act, one might say, of historicism on Coetzee's part, applied to his own works. As Roger Fowler reminds us,

> . . . [a]lthough good literature is 'not of an age, but for all time', the social and intellectual climate within which every writer has to work, and which his writing reflects in some degree, is subject to change. The uninformed reader is therefore likely to bring to the literature of the past assumptions and associations that may be quite alien to the frame of reference from which that literature derives its form and meaning. The aim of historicism is to make works of different periods more accessible to the modern reader by reconstructing the historically appropriate background as it affects an understanding and judgment of the work concerned.
>
> (*Modern Critical Terms*, 115)

And, if a common criticism of historicism is that the application of a modern mind to the reconstruction of a past age cannot but help be tainted by its very modernity, Coetzee blunts that critique by, as we saw in Chapter One of this thesis, drawing attention to the duplicity of self-consciousness; no doubt the older Coetzee has selective interpretations regarding his life and is troubled by possible self-deceits, but who else but Coetzee would best understand the habits and nuances of his own mind? Fowler asserts that while "[h]istoricism … cannot provide us with an absolute or objective measure of literary meaning or value[.] … it is, properly used, one of the critic's most valuable tools. Provided its limitations are recognized, it can extend and refine our understanding of the literature we most admire."(116)

Whether or not "justifying" his choices from a position of relative strength (Coetzee is a writer with prestigious prizes to his name) and with a newly acquired Australian-citizenship in hand is tainted with a certain amount of self-serving, the act does point towards Coetzee's ability, finally in these late works, to tell certain stories about himself, stories processed by his brain and applied to emotional, even shameful events in his past, and in the final analysis, to afford his own life narrative the space to unfold within his prose. Coetzee's note about Musil is absolutely applicable to himself: "it is remarkable how directly this reserved, ironical modernist transposed the events of his life into his fictions".

At the heart of this narrative appears, surprisingly and movingly, the bare outlines of a deep insecurity regarding the state of his soul: it would appear that Coetzee has always harboured a suspicion that he is undeserving of love and furthermore, that love cannot transform or reform another human being. In *Youth*, he says "[h]e believes in passionate love and its transfiguring power. His experience,

however, is that amatory relations devour his time, exhaust him, and cripple his work." (78) In *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, he appears to soften his views and to allow others in, even to learn to trust outside himself. The callowness of youth seems to be making way for a maturing and a mellowing.

Coetzee's characters in the books looked at in this thesis are arguably versions of himself, born out of his own "flesh and blood experiences". *Youth* sets up the foundations of who Coetzee is, the scrupulous habits of mind as well as the self-doubts. In *Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, we find the answers to the questions we posed at the beginning of this thesis: the place of truth in fiction is an unchanging, absolute value-in-itself for Coetzee, even if "the truth" is not always defensible or reachable; and therefore authors should be allowed to judge, to patrol the line between good and evil, and even presume to instruct – but only if they are completely open to attacks of criticism and derision, as that is the only way to ascertain the health of any idea. Only art that risks everything is deemed worthy of life itself, and the artist who rises to the occasion meets his human duties with full awareness.

This thesis has shown, it is hoped, that within the continuum of Coetzee's oeuvre, these late books comprise a shift in textual and rhetorical strategies that invites us to consider afresh facets of authorship. This shift in turn may have much to add to critical theory, in particular the questions it brings to bear on the need to avoid conflating protagonist with author and the apparent impossibility of recovering any authorial intention. It also could have implications for Coetzee's own categorization as a writer -- a writer who increasingly slips the bounds of theory, as well as his early, constant spirit of irony, for he appears to be finally writing from outside the

prison of South Africa. The physical and psychic liberation have infused his writing with an energy that is more direct, more personal and more engaged, in its moral-ethical thematics. Taken together, these late books create a progressive path of thinking about the author function, and what it may mean to write fiction.

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